





The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 0

Prologue

Standing in front of the school gate always made countless thoughts flood my mind. Would I smell weird? Was my shirt untucked? What if I accidentally walked in while the kids were gossiping about me?

Of course, most of these worries were unfounded, but some habits are impossible to fix, even if you die and are reborn—let alone finding yourself transformed into a girl and thrust into a novel's world.

Who would've thought that teasing a writer with a comment like, "Stop joking around about reincarnation curses" would actually get me reincarnated? No less into a plotline where the protagonist suffers isolation after a slip of the tongue. Harsh, isn't it?

Not that I was ever ostracized in my previous life for saying something wrong. Attention didn't bother me much—things like giving an introduction after transferring schools, or suddenly being inserted into an academy where the cliques had already been sorted the day after orientation.

Like today, when I would be shoved into a crucial moment: the first homeroom meeting of the semester, where the teacher and students meet for the first time. There I would stand, a misfit barging in uninvited and awkwardly introducing myself, "I wasn't at the entrance ceremony, but from today on, I'll be joining you."

"Don't panic, Dorothy… You're just another student… just a student…"

Ah. But I'm the eldest daughter of a prominent family, for heaven's sake. Yet even my homeroom teacher can't remember my name properly. What little presence I have is utterly pathetic.

I could feel my pride being shredded in real time. If the teacher can't even remember my name, would the students? They might think my name is weird, especially since everyone else here has western-sounding names, while mine has a distinctly Eastern flavor. Would they call me outdated? Mock me for it?

Do other people from the Eastern Continent even attend this academy? This world is rife with prejudice among species, as the novel frequently showed. Even as a child of a noble family, I might not escape discrimination.

The original story openly depicted prejudice against beastfolk. What's to stop me from becoming a victim of this world's rampant racism?

To make matters worse, every student here is either a noble or royalty. The very title of the story is A Commoner in the Noble Academy. What if I make a mistake in front of these elite heirs? Would they jeer, "A beast belongs in a cage!" and ostracize me?

But more pressing: how should I introduce myself? I was always terrified of public speaking in my past life and shoved the responsibility onto team leaders whenever possible. Now, my tail's wagging on its own. While my father here taught me how to control my facial expressions and gaze, he never explained what to do about my tail.

Click.

The door opens. I must look like a prisoner being dragged to the gallows. I can feel their gazes piercing into me. White. Black. Their stares are suffocating.

The teacher seems to be saying something, but none of it registers.

"Uh… Miss Hoyeon? Could you introduce yourself?"

Oh, it’s here.

“…Eldest daughter of the Baek Imperial Family. My name is Baek Hoyeon.”

The room fell silent—so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Even the creak of chairs and students whispering ceased. So much for leaving a good impression and starting a cheerful academy life. My plan was completely ruined.

I’ll definitely be ostracized. Tomorrow, my desk will probably be scribbled on with words like gross, filthy, or stinks.

Still, since I’m in the middle of introducing myself, I should at least finish properly. Deep breath.

“…Haa. I look forward to working with you.”

I don’t remember much after that. The teacher broke the silence with some words, and I found myself assigned to a seat—next to the only commoner in the academy, who also happens to be the protagonist of this world.

—

I couldn’t tell if the story was derailing because of my presence as an irregularity or because this was no longer just a novel. Regardless, the character now standing before me, who didn’t exist in the original story, immediately grabbed my attention.

Especially since she appeared to be connected to the villainous faction in the second arc: the Baek Empire. A militaristic dictatorship that conquered over 85% of the Eastern Continent. In the original plot, the Baek Imperial Family had no children. If the story were following canon, the girl standing at the front of the classroom shouldn’t exist.

White hair, golden eyes, and an expression that screamed, I don’t care about any of you.

“…Eldest daughter of the Baek Imperial Family. My name is Baek Hoyeon.”

Every syllable dripped with disdain, as if even her own presence here annoyed her. While many students at this academy could boast impressive lineage, they all paled in comparison to her.

Readers of the original story often debated why the heroines were so insufferable, concluding that it was because they’d been spoiled from a young age. A popular line of reasoning was that their affluent upbringing made them accustomed to being pampered. After all, one heroine even famously exclaimed, “Not even my father ever hit me!” during a much-deserved comeuppance.

How arrogant would this girl turn out to be? Her sigh of reluctant civility as she muttered, “Haa. I look forward to working with you,” gave me a clue.

“Well, let’s see… an empty seat…”

The teacher—bless her for being the academy’s only source of cuteness—scanned the room before landing her gaze on the seat next to mine.

Ah. Crap.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The Mysterious Transfer Student

The number three holds a special meaning for humans—though whether I could still consider myself human was another matter.

Trinities, three-legged crows, third chances, three-person rumors, and the three sacred treasures…

Even beyond humanity, there's something about the number three.

It takes three sticks to make something stable, three lines to form a polygon. I don't know if that holds in this world, but on Earth, the third planet from the Sun was named Earth.

Why am I rambling about this? Because, including the teacher in front of me, three teachers in a row had blatantly ignored me.

First-period history teacher, second-period liberal arts teacher, third-period math teacher.

Back in my past life, one of my few points of pride was being a model student who always followed instructions, and yet here I was, being dismissed outright by the very people I was supposed to impress.

…Looks like I've been completely marked by this academy from day one. Not that transfer students are a common occurrence in a prestigious academy for nobles.

Maybe there was one in the original story? I only read up to chapter 20 before I rage-quit over a particular plot point and got pulled into this mess. With nearly 400 chapters left, it's possible some mysterious transfer student could've shown up later.

You know, the kind that's a suspiciously calm, slit-eyed, perpetually smiling girl who screams danger the moment you see her.

Maybe I'm projecting—those are the only types of characters I seem to notice.

Still, there had been some chatter in the classroom before I arrived.

But since my introduction, the silence had been deafening.

Occasionally, small groups would leave the classroom, presumably to talk behind my back.

Whenever I made eye contact with one of them, they'd flinch and look away.

Great. I could already imagine their whispered insults. Maybe it's not so bad—just me and the protagonist sitting here without a clique.

I felt a brief sense of kinship with him… until I remembered he's a fraud.

The story's tags proudly proclaimed harem and featured explicit chapters. He's a fake introvert—an extrovert in disguise.

The thought only made me more depressed. The lessons weren't helping, either.

The liberal arts teacher droned on about gods and divine grace, which grated on my nerves.

They don't even know what a real god is and yet keep praising divine mercy. Annoying.

Math was slightly better, though I already knew everything being taught.

Back in high school, I scoffed, “When will I ever use these formulas?” Who knew the answer was in a place like this?

I wouldn’t say I was using the knowledge here, though. I just solved the problems on the board by myself to pass the time. Not that I’d volunteer answers—getting called out for “showing off” would crush me.

It was a desperate attempt to make the math period end faster. After this, it’d be lunch, followed by gym for the rest of the day.

While I wrestled with my boredom, I noticed the odd stares coming from my right.

Ignoring them, I thought about the academy’s structure: first-years followed a fixed curriculum, while second-years chose subjects suited to their aptitudes.

I knew what I excelled at, but I wasn’t sure this academy offered anything similar.

Well, I’d figure it out when the time came. For now… this was mind-numbingly dull.

The silence was oppressive, with everyone only speaking when absolutely necessary. It was as if they’d all conspired to make my ostracism as thorough as possible.

I sighed. Maybe I should’ve stayed on the Eastern Continent. At least I wouldn’t be treated so coldly there. Was this punishment for insisting on attending the protagonist’s academy?

…At least the food would be good. The chapters I’d read never described meals in detail, but it’s a noble academy—it had to be decent.

Surely, they wouldn’t kick me out just because I’m beastfolk.

—

Was I sent here because of some political power struggle? Unlikely. I'm the only child of the Emperor of the Baek Empire—born late in his life and cherished beyond measure. He wouldn't exile me.

Was it for education? Doubtful. No matter how prestigious Amaurus Academy might be, the Empire could hire private tutors to offer a better education at home.

So why? I couldn't fathom it. The girl sitting next to me hadn't moved or spoken all morning, exuding nothing but an aura of displeasure.

Originally, the heroine sitting diagonally to my right—Exipri—would've initiated a conversation by now. Instead, she was visibly unnerved by Hoyeon's oppressive presence. If Exipri, with her maxed-out charm and sociability stats, was this cowed, how could the others stand a chance?

Hoyeon's first impression was clear: Don't mess with me. Her every sigh and glare screamed as much. Honestly, I was terrified to even say a word to her.

—

As the bell rang to signal the end of class, Hoyeon left the room in long strides, her distaste for the classroom almost palpable. The moment she was gone, the students began chattering about her.

Some expressed frustration or disbelief, but most were speculating. How did a beastfolk even get into this academy? Can nobles transfer here? What's her imperial lineage like?

She seemed to attract the wrong kind of attention. With her background, though, she could probably punch every student here and only get a day's suspension.

—

Just as I was brooding, a sweet voice broke my thoughts.

"Hi there~"

Ah, I'd almost forgotten. Exipri was speaking to me now. Hearing her voice in person was oddly moving—it felt different from just imagining it.

"Hello, Lady Exipri."

"Oh! You know me?"

"Well, with a face as adorable as yours, how could I not?"

No exaggeration. She'd maxed out charm and charisma at the expense of every other stat. Her combat, intelligence, and stamina were so laughably low it was a miracle she'd made it to the academy.

She blushed, clearly delighted by my flattery. This pure-hearted innocence had earned her the nickname "puppy of the social circle" among the nobility.

"Hehe, thank you for the compliment!"

"Was there something you needed?"

"Oh, right!"

Her intelligence stat really was abysmal, as proudly noted in her official profile.

"I got put in a different class from my friends… Could you walk me to their room?"

"Of course."

—

As we walked, she suddenly asked, "By the way, isn't Baek Hoyeon scary?"

Scary? Absolutely. Hoyeon radiated a dangerous aura and was connected to the second arc's villain faction. Still, if there was even the slightest chance of befriending her, it might change the tragic events of the second arc.

“She is, but don’t you think it’s important to get along?”

We reached Exipri’s friends—a group of noble girls. The leader, Camilla, brightened at the sight of Exipri but immediately glared at me.

“And who might you be?” she asked icily.

Camilla, another heroine. Great.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 2

Chapter 2: A Pleasant Lunchtime (1)

Staring at the steak wouldn’t change anything, but when did humans ever act solely on reason? Even knowing it was pointless, I kept glaring at the food on my plate.

It wasn’t because it tasted bad. True to the reputation of a noble academy, the dishes were sophisticated, bringing out the natural flavors of the ingredients exquisitely.

Compared to the food I ate back at home, it wasn’t inferior in quality. It lacked the warmth of a mother’s love, sure, but you could still sense the effort put into the cooking. So, what was the problem? My appetite.

My palate, already accustomed to strong spices, couldn’t fully enjoy the food here. It tasted good, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that the flavors were too mild.

Compared to the fiery heat of chili oil or the rich, unique taste of exotic spices, the food here felt lacking. And most importantly, there was no rice.

For a Korean who thrives on rice, this was unacceptable. I didn’t have the courage to complain, but I couldn’t help feeling betrayed.

How could the world’s most prestigious educational institution not serve a simple bowl of steamed rice?

The thought crossed my mind: “You only get betrayed if you have expectations in the first place.” But avoiding expectations entirely? That’s difficult, isn’t it? After all, this was the main stage of the novel, even if it was now my reality. How could I not have any expectations?

This was the place where the protagonist and his heroines laughed and enjoyed their time together. If the food wasn’t good, could they really laugh like that? Personally, I doubted it.

…Maybe my premise was wrong. Maybe I was the only one who found the food lacking.

From the perspective of this continent, it might even be considered gourmet cuisine.

My taste buds, spoiled by dishes overflowing with spices and oils, might have been ruined.

It wasn’t like this was the first time. Whenever I tried trending foods—tapioca snacks, bizarre fusion tteokbokki—with my few friends, I was always the one who found them unpalatable.

Come to think of it, their reactions had been rather hesitant back then too. Maybe it was because we ate something bad?

…A horrifying thought struck me. What if everything had tasted awful, but I was the only one too oblivious to fake enjoyment, blurting out that it was bad and ruining the mood? I shook my head quickly, pushing the thought away. No, their expressions were grim because the food really was bad.

That had to be it.

-Tsk.

Since becoming this person, it has become harder to hide my emotions. In the past, even if I didn’t like something, I managed to go along with it.

But now, my displeasure immediately showed through my actions: my tail swished, my ears twitched, or I unconsciously clicked my tongue.

Though I tried to be mindful of others' reactions, it hadn't caused any major problems so far.

At least, not with my parents. Back home, I had been the Crown Princess, so there was no one to reprimand me—aside from my tutor.

But here, it was different. At Amaurus Academy, everyone was treated equally, whether they were commoners or nobles.

This academy wasn't devoid of princes or princesses, or even imperial bloodlines. Yet all of them were treated as mere students.

It would be no different for me. On top of that, I was a complete outsider, even a different species, so I had to tread carefully.

I wasn't exactly sure how my father had managed to get me enrolled here, but it couldn't have been a peaceful process.

In the 19 years I had spent on the Eastern Continent, there hadn't been a single year without war.

The more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed that it was done legitimately. Could someone like me, who entered under such circumstances, really complain about the academy food?

I glared at the steak in front of me. Cutting off a piece and chewing on it, I found it… tolerable.

By now, the steak, which had once been warm, was awkwardly lukewarm. It reminded me of my high school days, eating alone.

Back then, I'd try to savor my food slowly, only for it to grow cold and unappetizing, ending up in the trash.

…How depressing. When I ate with my family, even eating slower than this, the food always tasted so much better.

It must have been because it suited my taste. That had to be it.

I hadn't served myself much to begin with, so it didn't take long to finish. When I stood up, I could feel eyes following me, but I ignored them and placed my dishes in the return slot before heading to the academy store. What's an academy story without a school store, right?

The thought lightened my mood a little. Snacks. Heroine events. Dates!

Not that I'd experience them, of course. But surely they happened. In over 320 chapters, there had to be at least one scene where the protagonist and a shy, loner-type heroine bonded at the store.

The thought made me angry. The protagonist just drifts through life, and girls flock to him.

Meanwhile, I'm ostracized the moment I arrive. And he's not even that handsome. Okay, fine, he's good-looking, but still only average by this world's standards.

…The more I dwelled on it, the more pathetic I felt. For now, I decided to focus solely on eating some carbs.

After becoming a girl, I didn't need to eat as much as before. One bowl of rice was enough to fill me, and honestly, I already felt full. But could a Korean call it a proper meal without eating carbs?

So, I resolved to at least grab some bread. Cream bread, no matter the world, was always delicious.

I ignored the girl who had hurriedly looked away and fled after our eyes accidentally met.

As much as I wanted to go home, that wasn't an option. If only to satisfy my curiosity about how the novel ended—or to enact some petty revenge on the author—I was staying in this academy.

Though I wasn't sure what kind of revenge I could even take on the author.

At one point, I'd considered burning this entire world to the ground, but that would've been overkill. No, the author wasn't detestable enough for me to

ruin the world I had to live in.

While pondering these thoughts, I headed toward the store. Then, suddenly, a girl stopped me.

Wondering if I knew her, I quickly scanned her face, but she didn't match anyone in my memory or knowledge.

Who was she? Was she about to start pressuring me for real now?

Finally, the insidious darkness of noble society was closing in on me. Though I lamented the situation, I refused to let myself be taken advantage of without resistance. Mustering a bit of emotion, I asked the girl in front of me a direct question.

"Who are you?"

Iris couldn't understand why Stefania had refused to ask Baek Hoyeon her question directly and instead pushed the task onto her.

She couldn't accept it, neither in her head nor her heart. After all, she had worked hard to build a cordial relationship with Baek Hoyeon, which had resulted in her family's regional specialties being supplied to Baek Hoyeon's merchant guild. She hadn't done anything to earn Baek Hoyeon's ire. So why had she been burdened with this role?

To inquire about the current political situation?

Worse still, a member of her family had recently been embroiled in an unsavory incident involving the Baek Empire.

How on earth was she supposed to broach such a topic? Should she start with spices? Or maybe textiles?

However, all thoughts vanished the moment she stood before Baek Hoyeon.

If someone were to ask her what it felt like to stick one's head into the jaws of a beast, she now felt confident she could answer immediately.

An overwhelming presence that left her unable to breathe. Golden eyes that seemed to pierce the depths of her soul. A thick aura of hostility that allowed for no movement, no defiance.

For a fleeting moment, the thought crossed her mind: she might actually die here. Was her heartbeat always this loud? She asked herself this unanswered question, her intended inquiry fading from her mind. It was only when Baek Hoyeon spoke again that Iris managed to pull herself together.

“If you have no business with me, I’ll be going.”

“I-I’m Iris Stargazer!” she stammered, managing at least to introduce herself.

She could only manage this much because of Stefania. Stefania detested breaking promises, and Iris had promised to gather information about the current political climate.

Desperation drove her. Though she had managed to blurt out her name, she had no idea how to continue the conversation.

What could she say to avoid offending Baek Hoyeon and to keep her attention? In that split second, Iris could think of only one option.

“Regarding… the recent incident in the Empire involving my foolish uncle, I wanted to offer my apologies…”

Even to Iris, the words sounded clumsy. But it was the best she could come up with on the spot.

“Stargazer… Star… Ah. You must mean that fiery missionary. If it’s about him, don’t worry. A family shouldn’t have to take responsibility for an individual’s mistakes.”

For a moment, relief washed over Iris. The oppressive pressure hadn’t entirely dissipated, but at least Baek Hoyeon showed some willingness to engage in conversation. That was a good sign.

“If you came to apologize, I’ll accept it. Now, I’m busy, so I’ll take my leave.”

With that curt statement, Baek Hoyeon turned to go, leaving Iris standing there, her face drained of color.

She needed to uncover the political situation, no matter what, and this turn of events left her frantic.

Just as she was about to open her mouth to say something—anything—she saw and felt it.

Those eyes. Eyes that glared at her, wordlessly demanding she stop speaking.

The crushing fear that she had barely managed to suppress with her sense of duty came roaring back. The last of her courage failed her, and she collapsed to her knees.

Baek Hoyeon paid no attention to the pathetic sight she left behind. Without even a glance back, she briskly continued on her way.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 3

Chapter 3: A Pleasant Lunchtime (2)

Danger.

Danger, danger, danger. I just had a normal conversation with a girl for the first time.

Was there anything weird about it? Did my breath smell? What if I looked like some awkward outcast?

“…Haah.”

Taking a deep breath, I felt like my panicked mind was finally starting to clear up a bit.

Still, was I sure I had acted normal during that interaction?

Up until now, I’d only ever spoken to women of higher or lower status than myself—not someone my own age.

Honestly, I was surprised. Apologizing out of the blue after calling someone over? That was fresh.

I half-expected something more along the lines of ‘So-and-so young lady has a message for you! Know your place, hohoho!’

Maybe I wasn’t as ostracized as I thought. If there were girls polite enough to come apologize to me, perhaps my reputation hadn’t gone completely down the drain.

The idea that I might blend into academy life as quietly and uneventfully as I had during high school made me feel a little better.

So, her name was Iris, huh? She was a cute girl. But more than anything, I envied her amethyst-colored hair.

Every morning, I had to deal with my own conspicuous mess of white hair streaked with black strands, looking like salt-and-pepper chaos.

No offense to my parents, but if I'd taken after my father's jet-black hair instead, maybe I wouldn't stand out so much. Not that it would've helped much, what with my tail and animal ears drawing attention. Still, humans naturally want to hide even the smallest parts of themselves.

At least I do. Even in my past life, when my mom bought me brightly colored clothes, I'd wear them once or twice before retreating back to my collection of plain black t-shirts.

Anyway, maybe I'd been too rattled earlier and fled in a panic, but I had somehow ended up in an unfamiliar part of the academy.

A glance at a nearby clock told me there were still more than 30 minutes left of lunchtime.

The buffet had been self-service, so I regretted not sampling more food, but I couldn't recall any dishes that offered the kind of bold flavors I was craving.

I made a mental note to spend more time filling my plate with food that suited my taste next time. For now, I looked around and found myself in a strangely bustling area.

…Where's the school store? This is suffocating.

Asking someone for directions wasn't an option. Everyone who saw me scurried away as if I were Moses parting the Red Sea.

I couldn't muster the nerve—or shamelessness—to stop someone actively avoiding me just to ask for help.

What a dilemma. I briefly considered requesting a map from a teacher after classes, but then I spotted someone.

White hair similar to mine but a different shade, sapphire-blue eyes that gleamed brightly, and, most importantly, the name etched in the official profiles I'd read before: The Outcast.

Amidst the academy's socialites, who excelled at emotional manipulation and covert bullying, this girl stood out in stark contrast: Anastasia, the Northern Duke's daughter.

The backstory said she had joined battles against northern barbarians at the age of 13 and spent six years gaining real combat experience before enrolling in the academy… not that I cared about that.

What caught my attention was her early portrayal in the story as an outcast. Her awkward demeanor and subtle mistreatment by others had made her one of the most relatable characters to me.

She was someone who wielded weapons instead of fans and struggled with noble etiquette, often speaking bluntly. Watching her interactions had always been satisfying.

She either hadn't heard about me or simply didn't care. Oddly, that indifference was comforting.

If anyone could give me directions without much trouble, it was probably her.

Seeing someone familiar—even a minor character—made my tail reflexively puff up in excitement.

"…Who are you?"

Her voice was awkward, as I'd expected from an outcast like her. For some reason, the fact that she matched my mental image so perfectly made me feel a little giddy.

"I'm Baek Hoyeon. Nice to meet you."

“…Ah, I’m Anastasia,” she replied.

“…”

“…”

Silence. I’d resolved to ask her a question, but I hadn’t thought through exactly what to say. What could I ask to make this less awkward?

“…Do you know where the school store is?”

“The school store?” she repeated, blinking.

I nodded. Her guarded posture didn’t relax, but I could sense she was at least willing to answer.

By the way, she really was stunning. I’d read descriptions of her beauty in the text, but seeing it in person, there was no other word for it: beautiful.

And yet, eventually, even she would end up befriended by that hypocritical socialite protagonist.

I couldn’t recall exactly when it happened, but I’d skimmed the extra chapters and vaguely remembered it. Though honestly, 19 years of living had erased most of my knowledge of the novel.

Thinking about it made me bitter. Here I was, stuck as a nobody, while that guy got to live a carefree life of excess. Still, I felt better looking at Anastasia’s face.

Maybe, just maybe, I could mess with the plot just a little.

“If you go left from that dormitory over there, you’ll see the Student Union building. The store is on the first floor.”

“Thank you.”

I wanted to chat with her longer, but it wasn’t like she knew me. Holding her back any further would’ve felt selfish, so I gave her a slight bow and

headed for the store, already anticipating the bread waiting for me.

…Come to think of it, she had also been heading toward the store. But after I asked for directions, she seemed to change course.

Surely it wasn't because she didn't want to walk in the same direction as me, right? That'd be too much. Shaking off the ominous thought, I arrived at the Student Union.

As expected of Amaurus Academy, the building was both grand and ornate.

If I were grading it on extravagance alone, I'd give it 150 out of 100. It was so massive that even a city hall would seem small in comparison—more like a small palace.

Did it really need to be this big? The thought crossed my mind, but I quickly dismissed it.

This was a school for the children of noble families who saw grandeur as a virtue. For them, this level of opulence was probably just right.

Now that I think about it, my parents had always been frugal. Despite being an emperor, my father despised unnecessary luxuries, and my mother, who was deeply detached from worldly affairs, was even less inclined toward extravagance. It was no wonder I wasn't accustomed to such splendor.

Like a bumpkin gawking at the grand scenery, I looked around while searching for the school store.

Finding it wasn't hard; its large sign practically screamed, "I'm the store!" making it stand out instantly.

I entered, suppressing a small worry—hopefully, a single loaf of bread wouldn't cost a whole gold coin. Thankfully, the prices weren't that outrageous.

Of course, as soon as I stepped in, the atmosphere around me froze over, so leisurely browsing wasn't really an option.

It felt like my mere presence was stealing the peace of those who had come here to relax. As someone who deeply valued my own alone time, I felt genuinely sorry for them.

Scanning the shelves, I didn't notice anything particularly special. While the bread looked different from what I was used to, the smell was familiar.

I picked out a few items and grabbed a carton of milk as well. When I paid, it didn't even cost a full gold coin.

So even the wealthy don't gouge prices unnecessarily. With that minor curiosity satisfied, I stepped outside, only to feel a familiar, lingering gaze. I'd never experienced such attention in my previous life, but in this one, it had happened several times.

Something—or someone—was watching me.

The thought barely had time to form before the gaze disappeared as abruptly as it had come, leaving me unsettled.

Was it the shadowy hand of noble society? But there hadn't been any malice in that stare.

Perhaps it was the non-human blood running through my veins, but living as Baek Hoyeon gave me senses I never had in my past life.

I could detect the faint movements of insects, the intentions behind distant gazes, even the subtle emotions hidden in someone's breath.

Of course, this wasn't always a good thing. While I could use my heightened senses to find peace in the stillness of nature, the combination of my personality and hypersensitivity often resulted in near panic when I found myself in crowded places—a frustrating synergy.

But for now, I decided to dismiss the gaze from my mind. Whoever it was didn't seem worth investigating, especially since the lunchtime rush was causing students to flood the store. I quickly moved on, needing to escape the suffocating environment.

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Elsewhere, Camilla and her group had just finished pestering Exipri, essentially robbing her and scolding a man for daring to hold Exipri's hand.

Thankfully, I managed to get away by playing along with their mood enough to appease them.

Camilla's role early in the story had been to showcase just how unpleasant nobles could be, so she wasn't a particularly popular character.

However, she did play a significant role in overcoming the first major crisis, so there was no reason to antagonize her unnecessarily.

Now then, I'd already encountered Exipri and Camilla—next up was Anastasia. A fan favorite heroine even in the latter half of the story.

She was a battle-hardened heroine, a cool and aloof tsundere. Yet, she also believed that holding hands with a man would instantly result in a child.

And now, that very character was alive and breathing before my eyes. How could I possibly miss this?

Her heroine event had taken place at the school store. Unable to pay for her items because she'd forgotten her wallet, the protagonist had stepped in to cover for her, marking their first encounter.

Being in the next class over, they ran into each other often, and by around chapter 100, they even had a spicy scene together.

The gap between her initial awkwardness and that moment? Truly a masterstroke by the author.

Even though the ending had been botched, didn't someone once say that messing up the final chapter was a hallmark of a masterpiece? It even inspired me to write that forbidden 5,700-word critique, which ultimately brought me here. In a way, I was grateful.

Factoring in the time I'd wasted dealing with Camilla's group, I decided there wouldn't be time for a proper meal.

Heading straight for the store seemed like the best option. As I walked, I wondered idly what Anastasia's voice would sound like in person.

But then, I noticed something strange—a tension in the air in one particular area.

Curious, I tried to recall if anything like this had happened in the original story, but nothing came to mind.

Now that this was reality and not a novel, I figured it must be something happening outside the protagonist's perspective.

My curiosity got the better of me, so I followed the strange atmosphere.

And there, I saw Baek Hoyeon and Anastasia facing each other.

…Why?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 4

Chapter 4: A Pleasant Lunchtime (3)

The atmosphere was so tense it felt like a fight could break out at any moment.

Even Anastasia, who was often oblivious to social cues, couldn't ignore the ominous aura radiating from Baek Hoyeon.

Anastasia held her ground, meeting Hoyeon's gaze as if refusing to back down. But Hoyeon didn't seem particularly bothered, simply staring at Anastasia with an air of disinterest.

"…Who are you?" Anastasia broke the silence first, her voice cutting through the oppressive tension.

Hoyeon responded, but her words offered no clarity of intention.

"I'm Baek Hoyeon. Nice to meet you."

Her raised tail, stiff with hostility, seemed more like a threat than a greeting.

Her expression was far from welcoming—it was blatantly unapproachable.

Even someone as socially awkward as Anastasia could easily sense the unpleasant undertone in her demeanor.

Nevertheless, Anastasia seemed intent on defusing the situation through conversation.

"…Ah, yes. I'm Anastasia," she replied.

But her efforts were in vain. Hoyeon, ignoring her attempt to lighten the mood, fell silent once again.

The suffocating atmosphere resumed, teetering on the brink of complete deadlock—until Hoyeon suddenly spoke again.

"…Do you know where the school store is?"

"…The school store?" Anastasia asked, clearly puzzled.

Her reaction was understandable. The abruptness of the question was jarring, especially given the current tension.

For a moment, the thought sent a chill down my spine—Anastasia's early heroine event revolved entirely around the school store.

If Hoyeon's interference disrupted the event, it would make it nearly impossible to build a connection with her until much later in the story.

Sure enough, Anastasia directed Hoyeon to the store but then turned away and headed somewhere else.

This can't be happening.

For a brief moment, I considered following Anastasia to try and talk to her, but I quickly dismissed the idea.

She was the Northern Duke's daughter, while I was just a commoner. Attempting to approach her could only end badly.

Even though the academy nominally treated all students equally, invisible hierarchies were very much in play.

Social stratifications divided students vertically—peripheral nobility, central nobility, royalty—and horizontally—Imperial, Papal, and the others left to the fringes. Commoners didn't even rank.

If I, a mere commoner, tried to speak to Anastasia, a central noble, she might forgive me, but her followers surely wouldn't.

The thought left me burning with frustration. Although there would be other opportunities to raise her favorability later, missing this initial event was a huge setback.

Another, more unsettling thought crossed my mind. What if Hoyeon ends up wrecking the other heroines' events as well?

If that happened, then what?

The moment that grim possibility entered my head, I felt compelled to follow her.

Fortunately, nothing unusual happened on the way to the store, but the unease lingered.

Even if she wasn't disrupting events now, there was always the risk she'd derail something later.

I'll have to take the initiative. I reached a conclusion: I needed to move the events forward preemptively. Before things could spiral further, I had to establish connections with the heroines myself. That was my only goal for now.

After narrowing down the candidates, one heroine stood out: Cecilia.

A half-elf loved by spirits, Cecilia had her own devoted fanbase, though she wasn't quite as popular as Anastasia.

Her early heroine event was as follows: for reasons unknown, the spirit bound to her began to weaken. Concerned, Cecilia tried everything she could to help but only watched helplessly as the spirit grew weaker.

Consumed by fear of losing the spirit that had protected her since birth, she was on the verge of despair when the protagonist gave her a fruit from the World Tree, miraculously restoring the spirit and earning her place in his harem.

In the original timeline, her spirit didn't begin to weaken until the second semester, so the World Tree fruit wasn't immediately relevant.

However, as a half-elf, the World Tree held special significance to her.

If I were to obtain such a meaningful item and present it to her, her favorability would undoubtedly increase.

After all, elves relied on the World Tree in their lives, so it wouldn't seem out of place to use it in this way. And given that the World Tree's fruit didn't rot easily, I could simply store it until her spirit began to deteriorate. By then, she would associate me with the fruit and the solution to her crisis.

Conveniently, there was a young World Tree on the academy grounds, nestled in a secluded corner of a tranquil garden.

***

The place I finally arrived at, after dodging the many prying eyes that followed me, was the shelter with the massive tree.

For a moment, I wondered why such a serene space existed at the academy. But the clean, invigorating air filling my lungs swept away those idle thoughts.

From the moment I first set foot on this continent, I had noticed something unpleasant—a stifling, sticky sensation in the air.

It wasn't hard to figure out why. The natural magical ley lines running deep underground were distorted, forcibly controlled by a twisted force.

The people here seemed to revere this force, calling it “divine power.” But to my eyes, it was nothing more than warped and corrupted magic.

The ley lines weren’t the only thing affected. Even the celestial flows were manipulated by this so-called divine power. And the “mana” humans here used—a form of magic distinct from divine power—was also unpleasantly twisted, more than enough to irritate me.

While the protagonist and his group in the novel had no trouble navigating this world, I found it deeply uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because of my mother’s blood. That was when I truly began to feel the weight of this world’s reality.

Anyway, the people here divided themselves into warring factions, calling each other “blind fools” and “brutish heretics.” But to me, they didn’t seem all that different from one another.

Both sides were revolting. They meddled with the laws of the stars, tearing apart and reconstructing them to their liking, then clung to one another, squabbling over who was superior.

The sheer ugliness of it was nauseating.

On the coastline, the ley lines flowed sluggishly but were still intact.

However, the farther inland one ventured, the more the distorted magic gripped the ley lines tightly.

Towers of magic and churches alike extracted power from the ley lines, polluting them further—

“…Haah.”

But that wasn’t my problem. Once I graduated from the academy, I’d have no reason to remain on this continent.

I’d come here to learn, nothing more, and while I wouldn’t help this land, I wouldn’t cause harm either. The fresh air here seemed to cool my rising anger.

To be honest, when I first heard the academy was situated in the heart of the continent, I'd considered turning back.

The suffocating, stifling air of the coastal regions had nearly driven me mad, and the thought of going even deeper inland made me dizzy. Still, the thought of adventure and curiosity about what might happen at the academy had spurred me on.

And now, here I was, living with the consequences. Still, standing beneath this tree, I felt a bit more at ease. If the stifling sensation ever became unbearable, I could always come back here.

With light steps, I sat down on a nearby bench, pulled a cream bread out of the paper bag, and took a big bite.

The taste was wonderfully familiar.

It tasted just like the cream bread I used to buy from a bakery near my school during break times.

I felt a wave of nostalgia and almost started humming a tune, but the unopened milk in my bag reminded me to hold back the sentiment for now.

It was strange to drink milk from a glass bottle instead of a carton, but the glass had its own charm. Though it took some effort to open the tightly sealed cap, the fresh taste was worth it.

The mana-tainted aftertaste was slightly unpleasant, but paired with the cream bread, the flavor was bearable.

Maybe it was the clean air making everything taste better.

Since arriving at the academy, I'd felt like I'd been suffocating in oppressive, humid air, but here, the cool breeze was refreshing.

This was why I sought out such remote places—not because I feared people, but because the mana and divine power clinging to them were

revolting.

It’s definitely not because I’m afraid of talking to people.

-Growl

Who was that?

Just as I was enjoying my moment of solitude, the peaceful atmosphere was interrupted by a rude noise.

Expanding my senses, I quickly noticed a boy awkwardly hiding in the branches of the tree above me.

How long had he been there? How had I not noticed him until now? Why was he perched up there like that? As all these questions swirled in my mind, I kept chewing my cream bread.

…Wait. Looking closely, it was him. The protagonist.

What was he doing up there instead of charming girls? My curiosity was interrupted again by the sound.

-Growl

The loud rumble from his stomach was impossible to ignore.

Realizing he’d been found out, he fidgeted nervously, sneaking glances in my direction.

His awkwardness amused me, and for a moment, I considered teasing him.

But if he fell from that height, it would be a problem. Instead, I gestured for him to come down.

I watched as he climbed down using branches and grooves in the bark, clearly skilled despite his nervous demeanor.

Once he was on the ground, he looked tense, as though he'd been caught doing something improper.

I wanted to ask what he was doing up there like some kind of voyeur, but first things first. I pulled another cream bread from the bag and offered it to him.

His expression was comical, as though a giant question mark hung over his head.

He glanced between the bread and me several times, clearly confused.

I sighed in exasperation and, with a bit of irritation, tossed the bread toward him. He was startled but managed to catch it.

Still, he looked unsure, so I couldn't help but add, "Your stomach was growling so loudly I could hear it from down here. Eat. I have no taste for the cruelty of eating in front of the hungry."

Maybe it was the fresh air, or maybe it was because he was the protagonist, but talking to him felt oddly natural.

It was strange for an awkward loner like me to speak so freely to someone as sociable as him, but when else would I get the chance?

"…Ah, yes. Thank you," he mumbled, carefully unwrapping the bread like he'd done something wrong.

Watching him, a question popped into my mind.

What was his name again?

"Come to think of it, I never asked your name. In exchange for the bread, won't you tell me?"

The formal tone of my speech surprised me. I'd spent months being corrected by my father, and though I'd resented it at the time, it felt oddly satisfying now.

I almost felt like a real princess, speaking down to someone destined to be revered as a savior later on.

For now, though, I was the one with the upper hand, and the thought made my chest tingle.

"…It's Han Dogeon," he finally replied.

"Han Dogeon, is it? Are you from the Eastern Continent by chance?"

If I remembered correctly, that didn't sound like an Eastern-style name. In the original, he had a Western-style name like James or Chris.

"No, I'm not from the Eastern Continent. But my parents were."

Did the original story mention that? I didn't recall any detailed background for his family.

Then again, they weren't important characters, so there'd been no reason to elaborate on them.

Besides, the protagonist's setup was that he'd been a reincarnated soul from my world inhabiting the body of a commoner in this one.

The more I thought about it, the more chaotic it all seemed.

So I'd reincarnated into a novel about someone reincarnating into a novel. And on top of that, I'd been gender-swapped.

Then what about him? Had he been pulled into this story from a fictional Korea, only to end up inside this novel's protagonist? The layers of absurdity were giving me a headache.

Maybe his name was his original one from before he got dragged into this world.

I wanted to ask him more, but the bell signaling the end of lunch rang, cutting me off.

“It’s already time. You may leave now. Oh, and make sure to eat the bread.”

From experience, I knew nothing good came from being late to gym class.

It usually meant push-ups or running laps as punishment. I had no desire to run in this stifling air.

As I headed to the gymnasium, I couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d been hiding something behind his back the whole time.

But I dismissed the thought and focused on where I was going.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 5

Chapter 5: A Pleasant Lunchtime (4)

It took some time, but I finally arrived at the secluded grove where the World Tree stood.

Despite its backstory as a sapling gifted to the academy as a symbol of friendship with the elves, the tree had been abandoned in this remote corner. Odd, but it worked in my favor.

Imagine the outrage if word got out that a commoner had climbed the World Tree and plucked its fruit.

Even someone like Exipri would shun me after that.

A prince might get away with such an incident being called a “mishap,” but for a commoner like me, it’d be a one-way ticket to ruin.

The grove was deserted, likely due to its isolated location and the fact that lunchtime was nearly over.

That was perfect for me. I’d initially come here just to see how crowded it might get on a typical day, but the absence of people was an unexpected boon.

Technically, I didn’t have to pluck the fruit right now. Still, there was a sense of relief that came with securing it early. I decided to act.

“Strength.”

As mana coursed through my body, I felt a strange but invigorating sensation of power. A small perk from being a reincarnator: I could use simple magic.

That said, my abilities were limited to basic enhancements, like strengthening my body or producing small flames.

But compared to nobles who spent fortunes learning even minor spells, this was a definite advantage—though it didn’t change the fact that a commoner like me would still be at their mercy if they decided I was bothersome.

That’s why I was so determined to build relationships with the heroines.

Without connections, I’d have no hope of altering the ending—or even keeping myself alive.

Regardless of how much talent this body might possess, there was no way I could single-handedly defeat the final boss, someone capable of overturning the world with a mere gesture.

That existence.

Onbyeolbi.

The true power behind the Baek Empire, and likely Baek Hoyeon’s mother.

She was an insurmountable force—something far beyond human capacity.

Even with divine blessings, the support of numerous heroines, and countless strokes of fortune, the protagonist in the original novel had still faced a bad ending against her.

She had almost no weaknesses, and even when the protagonist discovered one near the very end, it was too late to exploit it.

Lost in thought about the novel’s story, I climbed higher into the tree, soon reaching its upper branches. Now came the hard part: finding the fruit.

Even though the World Tree was described as a “sapling,” its sheer size was staggering.

The fruit was said to be about the size of a person’s fist—large for a fruit, but tiny amidst the vast expanse of the tree’s branches.

I felt daunted just imagining how long this would take, but since I’d already climbed this far, there was no turning back.

After what felt like the hundredth near-miss where I almost fell, luck finally smiled upon me. I found the fruit.

It was about the size of a golf ball, but bright green with a small stem at the top.

I had no idea how this fruit would ultimately be used, but I was certain it would be the first step toward changing the ending.

After all, the author had once revealed in a post-completion Q&A that the only way to defeat Onbyeolbi was to win over every single heroine.

Not just the core group of heroines from the original story, but also less popular ones like Camilla, the forgotten heroines, and even those who defected or betrayed the protagonist. Everyone.

The author hadn’t clarified whether this would grant the protagonist power to face Onbyeolbi or unlock another solution, but it was the official word, so it had to be true.

I was preparing to climb back down when I noticed someone approaching the grove. Their light, sprightly steps suggested they were in a good mood.

I hesitated, debating whether to climb down or wait it out. In the end, I decided to suppress my presence and remain still. I doubted I could descend unnoticed, especially with the fruit in hand.

As the person came closer, I finally caught sight of them, and my mouth fell open.

There was no mistaking the white hair streaked with tiger-like black patterns—it was Baek Hoyeon.

Yet something about her was different.

The oppressive, almost murderous aura she'd exuded while confronting Anastasia was gone.

Her expression was far more relaxed and natural, and, most strikingly, she was smiling.

It was just a small upward curve of her lips, but it transformed her.

She looked nothing like the cold, unapproachable girl who had exuded hostility at every turn.

When she frowned, I hadn't really noticed, but now I could see how beautiful she truly was.

So much so that I wondered if she surpassed even Anastasia and the other heroines in terms of pure looks.

But none of that mattered. I didn't know everything about her yet, but one thing was clear: she wasn't someone who had any goodwill toward this academy.

From her hostile introduction to disrupting Anastasia's event, she'd gone from being a dangerous irregular with potential to someone I needed to avoid—or, ideally, eliminate from my calculations entirely.

Yet here she was, casually glancing around before sitting on a bench.

She pulled something out of a paper bag and began to eat.

Her tail swayed lightly, and her ears twitched—a clear sign she was in a good mood.

I squinted to see what it was.

Cream bread.

Seeing a crown princess of all people happily munching on cream bread left me with mixed feelings I couldn't quite articulate.

She looked so content, her expression radiating joy as she ate, that I suddenly realized I hadn't eaten anything since morning.

My stomach growled, betraying my hunger. The sound felt painfully loud, but surely it wouldn't carry from this height… right?

There was no way someone with heightened senses, even as a beastkin, could hear a stomach growl from the equivalent of the sixth floor of an apartment building.

At least, that's what I thought. Until she gestured for me to come down.

…She heard that?

Before I could dwell on my surprise, she gestured toward me again—this time more insistently, leaving no doubt that she wanted me to come down. Reluctantly, I began descending the tree.

I took extra care to keep the fruit hidden as I climbed down, and to my relief, she didn't ask any questions about what I might be holding.

Instead, what happened next left me utterly dumbfounded.

She reached into her paper bag, pulled out a cream bread, and wordlessly held it out to me.

Her gesture, as if expecting me to take it, was baffling. Why would she, of all people, offer me bread?

Considering how she'd glared daggers at Anastasia—a central noble, no less—her kindness toward a commoner like me made no sense.

Before I could think further, she lightly tossed the bread in my direction.

Panicking, I barely managed to catch it with one hand, nearly revealing the fruit I was hiding in the other. My heart raced at the close call.

“Your stomach was growling so loudly I could hear it from down here,” she said. “Eat. I take no pleasure in eating in front of the hungry.”

She wore a soft, benevolent expression, one I hadn’t expected from her.

I couldn’t wrap my head around her motives, but there was no reason to reject the bread she’d given me. For now, I accepted it.

“…Ah, yes. Thank you.”

She nodded slightly at my thanks, then stared at me intently for a moment before abruptly asking, “Come to think of it, I don’t know your name. Would you share it with me in exchange for the bread?”

My name.

While I’d used my original name upon enrolling at the academy, I hesitated. Was it safe to tell her?

I had a strong feeling that once I mentioned it, she’d ask if I was from the Eastern Continent. Her expression, filled with amused curiosity, made it seem harmless enough.

Why not? I can always make something up if needed.

“…Han Dogeon,” I replied.

“Han Dogeon,” she repeated, rolling the name over her tongue. “Are you from the Eastern Continent, by chance?”

As expected.

While her question brought me a small sense of satisfaction, it also made me wonder if my improvised backstory would hold up.

But since I’d already given her my name, there was no turning back now.

“No, I’m not from the Eastern Continent. But both of my parents were.”

It wasn’t unusual for a child of Eastern descent to have an Eastern-style name.

She seemed about to ask something else when the bell rang, signaling the end of lunchtime.

“Is it time already?” she murmured. “Very well, you may leave. Oh, and make sure to eat the bread.”

Her tone was slightly wistful, but she left as she spoke, walking away with her usual confident stride.

It was oddly endearing, how she delivered a parting line like that but ended up leaving first herself.

Watching her retreating figure, I unwrapped the bread and took a big bite.

It wouldn’t do much to fill my empty stomach, but it was better than nothing. After swallowing, I decided to head somewhere other than the gymnasium.

First, I needed to hide the fruit. Second, I wanted to help a certain heroine who would soon be late for class.

With the thought of the cream bread’s stable, comforting flavor lingering in my mind, I quickened my pace, ready to take my next steps toward twisting the ending.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Hellish Gym Class (1)

It wasn't like I had no friends at all. Even with my twisted personality, there was someone I could call a close friend.

Still, that friend was kind enough to treat me to meals every time we met.

When I once asked why they were doing this, they cheerfully replied, "There's no one else I can mess with as freely as you." For such words, they surprisingly weren't overly rude.

The worst they did was show up uninvited, rummage through my fridge.

Both my parents only came home at dawn, so it wasn't much of an issue. But they'd often help themselves to the soda or energy drinks I'd bought for myself.

Once, I couldn't take it anymore and snapped, asking why they had money to buy me food but not enough to buy their own drinks. Their response was:

-"It's not that I can't, but taking what you've saved for yourself tastes way better."

After hearing that, I gave up trying to understand this friend. I just let it be. Somehow, that made dealing with them easier.

Anyway, I remember once going to an internet café with them.

They had complained that their computer at home was far better than the garbage ones at the café, saying, "The downgrade shock is insane."

When I said the PCs at the café seemed fine, they asked if I could really enjoy gaming on these after experiencing my home setup. I got it right away.

Why did that memory come to mind now? Because I was experiencing that same “downgrade shock.” Just stepping out of the sanctuary left me struggling to breathe in the vile, stifling air.

I thought I’d adapted to the warped mana, having slowly traveled inland, but that was my misconception. My body had never adjusted to this nauseating energy, not even for a moment.

Having known the taste of fresh air, my body silently screamed at me to return to the sanctuary.

I regretted leaving, wishing I’d just napped in the classroom instead. But no amount of regret could change anything.

Each breath was so disgusting it made me want to vomit.

Fighting off whispers telling me no one would notice if I disappeared, I looked around for a gymnasium-like building.

But all the buildings were so ornate that I couldn’t tell them apart. I wandered, hoping to find a map, but it seemed such things weren’t made here, likely deemed unsightly.

I had messed everything up, all for a cream bun.

…Nothing I ever did worked out. I shouldn’t have even tried.

Looking back on my previous life, it was always the same. Every time I tried to do something myself, it either failed or led to worse outcomes.

Attempts at witty wordplay always killed the mood. Seeking new thrills with food always ended in disappointment.

When I tried to become a writer, no one read my work. Even when I tried to give up on life, I failed.

From then on, I lived like a plank of wood, waiting to sink. Too afraid to ask for help, too lazy to save myself, I let time erode me, aimlessly drifting with no purpose.

Like a rotting plank waiting to shatter and sink to the ocean floor.

That was me.

I thought it might be different this time.

I scolded myself for such gloomy thoughts, knowing I should focus on brighter things.

In the sanctuary, I could think positively, but being this far away left me a wreck. It had to be the mana's fault.

Yeah, it's all because of the mana.

It's why I'm so miserable, why lunch tasted awful, why my introduction was a disaster. All of it, the mana's fault.

The reason my mood swings, why I have no friends, why anything bad happens—it's all because of this warped mana.

Pinning the blame like that, no matter how absurd, made me feel a little better. Having a scapegoat made all the difference.

Of course, feeling better didn't fix anything. I was still lost, and the distant clocktower announced lunch was about to end.

Still, people move based on how they feel.

Alright, let's head back to the cafeteria. At least I remembered the way there.

That's what I thought, but my steps felt heavy. If just walking was this exhausting, how could I possibly handle gym class?

Impossible. Absolutely impossible. I could maybe manage in fresh air, but in this sewer-like atmosphere, I wouldn't even have my usual strength.

What should I do? Should I show up, let them see me, then say, "I'm not feeling well, can I sit out?" But that would draw everyone's attention.

What if they decided I was some spoiled brat? Or worse, what if I got labeled as the girl with no excuses left? Even if they already thought that, things could get worse. What if they said, “We’re all suffering, but you think you deserve special treatment?”

“Ugh… I’m going to be late…”

Before my negative spiral could continue, someone’s voice cut through my thoughts. It sounded familiar.

…Ah, I remembered. It was my homeroom teacher. I was a little hurt that they hadn’t learned my name yet, but it was what it was.

“Hello, Teacher.”

“…Oh, huh? Oh… Hoyeon, right?”

It was like I could hear them thinking, What are you doing here? They looked a bit unnerved, like they’d seen something scary, but I didn’t have the luxury to care.

“Do you know where the gymnasium is? I got lost.”

“Oh, you’re lost… Just follow this road straight, and you’ll find it.”

Thankfully, the teacher answered kindly. If I’d gone back to the cafeteria, I’d have taken a longer route. Maybe stopping to wallow in self-pity was lucky after all.

“By the way, could you describe the building? They all look so similar, I can’t tell them apart.”

“Ah… They do look similar. For an empire, I guess this level of extravagance is normal…”

They were clearly talking to themselves, but I heard it. No need to point it out, though. Overheard mutterings can be so embarrassing.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. The gym is a round building, so it should be easy to spot.”

I nodded, bowed lightly, and headed in the direction they indicated. Sure enough, there was a round building.

It looked more like a coliseum than a gymnasium. But this was fantasy, so overthinking was pointless. Inside, a muscular teacher was calling roll.

“Exipri.”

“Here!”

“Han Dogeon.”

“Han Dogeon? Not here?”

Dogeon hasn’t arrived yet. Maybe he was also lost? This teacher looked terrifying; poor guy.

Not that I was much better—I was late too.

“…Baek Hoyeon.”

“Here.”

Our eyes met from a distance. I couldn’t tell if they were glaring or if their natural expression was just intimidating. Either way, they exude authority, matching every stereotype of a gym teacher.

At least I wasn’t scolded. But I couldn’t shake the chill of gaining a “bad impression” stack. Was this teacher the type who didn’t snap unless you really crossed the line?

“Everyone’s here except one. I can’t believe someone’s late on the first day.”

Their voice radiated power, their gaze brimming with authority. They seemed more like a drill instructor than a teacher.

“Nice to meet you all. I’m Georg, your instructor for the year.”

Clap clap clap.

…?

I was the only one clapping. Wasn’t applauding after introductions a universal rule? But as I looked around, the reactions seemed off.

-What’s with her?

No one said it, but I felt it. What? Was clapping some kind of faux pas? I felt like a fool. The stares directed at me were filled with confusion.

“…Who just clapped?”

The tone was ominous. What was going on? The air grew tense, like I’d made some grave mistake.

“…Baek Hoyeon.”

Fearing we’d all be punished, I confessed. The teacher’s gaze felt like it could burn a hole through me. Most of it was confusion, but I detected a hint of anger.

“Is clapping a custom in the East?”

What was I supposed to say? If I answered or stayed silent, it felt like my head would explode.

How could clapping be worse than being late?

“…Sorry.”

I braced myself for a scolding but was spared.

“Hah. Learn the customs of this continent while you can. I’ll let it go this time.”

With a weary sigh, Georg moved on. The murmurs around me grew louder. I couldn’t hear them clearly, but I was sure they weren’t compliments.

Ah. I wanted to die. Why does everything I do turn out like this?

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 7

Chapter 7: Hellish Gym Class (2)

Although I wasn't publicly humiliated or singled out, the atmosphere was already beyond repair.

The kids who kept glancing at me and whispering were silenced by Instructor Georg's stern commands, but the emotions behind their chatter weren't so easily dismissed.

Beneath the predominant sense of confusion, there was an occasional tinge of hostility and blatant curiosity, enough to push me to the brink of panic.

Already nauseous, the thought of exercising in this state made my head spin. I was seriously worried I might throw up.

Regardless of my inner turmoil, the instructor carried on with the lesson.

"…Despite the earlier disturbance, I have a question for all of you. How many of you know how to use mana breathing techniques? Raise your hand if you do."

A few students, both boys and girls, raised their hands. It wasn't a large number—something I could count on two hands. The only notable thing was one particularly small girl raising her hand.

It wasn't as many as I expected. Usually, in fantasy stories, mana breathing is so common that even bandit leaders use it. Seeing this was a bit surprising.

"Next question—how many of you can use offensive magic?"

Fewer hands went up this time—only about three. I found it strange how he specifically mentioned offensive magic. Did that mean healing or defensive

magic wasn’t considered important?

Naturally, I didn’t raise my hand. Just being near mana made me feel like I was falling apart; there was no way I could wield it.

About half of the students didn’t raise their hands either. Did that mean half the students here were basically ordinary people?

“If you raised your hand for either, you don’t need to attend this class. If you can do even one of the two, you won’t need what I’m about to teach.”

At this sudden announcement, the previously quiet atmosphere became noisy. But the instructor’s next words quickly silenced everyone again.

“This class is for those who didn’t raise their hands. For those without exceptional strength. For those who cannot use magic to counter an enemy. This is education for the weak.”

Some of the students who had raised their hands left the gym immediately. About half of them, however, stayed, seemingly curious about the lesson.

Why aren’t they leaving? Maybe they just wanted to watch. Or maybe they felt like proving something.

“Staying, are you? Very well. But keep in mind—it might be boring for you. Now, I’ll ask again. Why do you think I’m teaching this class?”

The room fell silent. It seemed like plenty of students had opinions, but no one dared to speak.

At least the attention on me had finally waned, thanks to the instructor’s ability to command everyone’s focus.

I could finally breathe a little easier. For someone like me, even one person staring could make me feel like I’m suffocating. I silently thanked him.

If not for my father’s harsh lessons, I wouldn’t have been able to keep from panicking under all those stares.

If someone had talked to me earlier, I probably would've fainted on the spot.

But what's the point of teaching gym? Isn't it just an excuse to let kids play games or claim it's for health, only for the class to turn into self-study by the second semester?

That's how gyms worked in my world, at least. Some warm-ups, then everyone would split off to play soccer or basketball. The outcasts would huddle together, chatting about anime or games in the shade.

I was always alone, though. I won't make excuses—I was just too scared to join any group.

After one disastrous attempt at joining a soccer game, even the teacher stopped pushing me to participate.

As for the outcasts' group, I couldn't fit in with them either. I was more into reading novels than watching anime or webtoons, and any interest I had in those things faded within a week.

Gym class was basically time for me to read under the sun. Did it even need a deeper purpose?

"To teach you how to survive," Georg said, answering his own question. "So, to those who didn't raise their hands earlier—what would you do if a band of thieves attacked right now?"

"I would fight them," a confident-looking male student replied.

Georg's gaze landed on him like a predator sizing up its prey. The boy flinched for a moment but didn't back down.

"Do you have the strength to fight them?" Georg asked.

The student clenched his jaw and said nothing, his frustration evident.

"Courage without strength is recklessness. People preach about chivalry and standing your ground, but what can the weak possibly protect?"

The boy, clearly upset by being called weak, retorted, “But that’s—”

“Cowardly, you mean to say?” Georg cut him off. “Your name?”

“…Daniel.”

Daniel glared at Georg, his defiance clear. But the instructor scoffed, unimpressed, and pulled out a strange, black cube with a handle. It was far larger than the usual cubes I’d seen.

I didn’t know what it was for, but I could guess where he’d pulled it from.

An inventory. A convenient ability usually reserved for protagonists. Judging by the murmurs about spatial storage, I was probably right.

“Well then, Daniel. Try lifting this. If you can, I’ll acknowledge you as strong.”

It was clear this wasn’t an ordinary object, given that Georg had pulled it from a magical space. Still, Daniel stepped forward, determined.

Maybe he was riled up by the mention of chivalry? In this fantasy world, he might’ve been a noble dreaming of knighthood.

He approached Georg with grim determination, but the instructor looked down at him with a smirk.

“Lift it properly.”

The moment Daniel grabbed the cube, it slammed into the ground.

Judging by his expression and the way he had swaggered up earlier, this wasn’t intentional.

The cube had to be ridiculously heavy.

“Are you even trying, Daniel? Is this the extent of your resolve?”

Wow, harsh.

“N-No! I’m trying!” Daniel yelled, his face red as he strained to lift the cube. It was pitiful to watch as he abandoned all dignity, struggling in vain.

After wrestling with it for some time, Daniel finally gave up, releasing the handle and collapsing to his knees. Georg looked down at him, expressionless.

This was 100% rigged. That cube was clearly far too heavy for a normal student. What kind of academy was this? It felt more like a boot camp.

I just hoped it wouldn’t be the kind of place where failure meant the end.

“Next student.”

The others, who had been watching Daniel with a mix of pity and smugness, froze at Georg’s words. No one dared to speak, but their gazes betrayed their despair.

“What are you waiting for? You, the girl over there—step forward.”

The girl walked toward the cube like a prisoner headed for execution.

The onlookers were filled with two emotions: pity for her plight and resignation on their own.

She tried twisting and turning the cube, making strange noises as she strained, but it didn’t budge. No one laughed—everyone knew they’d be next.

None of the ordinary students managed to lift it. They all shouted, strained, and gave it their all, but the cube didn’t move an inch, as if mocking their efforts.

When it should’ve been my turn, Georg didn’t call on me. Instead, he began summoning the remaining students—those who had raised their hands earlier.

The students with mana breathing techniques did a little better. The first one even managed to lift the cube off the ground for about five seconds before

dropping it with a loud thud.

Grumbles erupted from the ordinary students, but Georg ignored them entirely, as if they weren't worth addressing.

"May I try it?" a voice called out.

A boy with golden hair and tanned skin—he practically screamed "golden sunshine"—raised his hand, a confident smile on his face. Despite the nickname I'd just given him, I couldn't tell if he was an actual delinquent.

Wow, people like him really exist.

Golden Sunshine strode up, his smirk brimming with determination. Georg nodded, allowing him to proceed.

Unlike the others, Golden Sunshine managed to lift the cube higher—up to his knees—and held it there for several seconds before dropping it. The impact kicked up a cloud of dust.

Satisfied, he returned to his spot, looking smug. The remaining students managed to lift it off the ground, but none performed as well as Golden Sunshine.

All except for one petite girl, who failed entirely.

Despite using mana breathing, she struggled more than the average student.

Watching her try and fail, almost in tears, was uncomfortable.

Still, she had friends who comforted her. Even she wasn't alone. A pang of defeat stung me as I watched.

Finally, Georg's eyes settled on me. Without a word, he gestured.

You're last.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Hellish Gym Class (3)

Fortunately, as I stepped forward, I wasn't met with a flood of stares.

Perhaps the others, having failed to lift the cube themselves, assumed I wouldn't succeed either.

Or maybe they simply lacked the energy to pay attention. Either way, it was a relief.

If I had to guess, it was probably the latter.

The ordinary students had grouped together in small clusters, panting heavily.

They seemed like they wanted to say something to each other, but I couldn't fathom what they were trying to accomplish when they couldn't even catch their breath properly.

I wasn't criticizing them for huddling together just because I lacked friends.

I simply didn't understand it. Did being in a group somehow make their exhaustion less miserable? Why did people cling so desperately to the idea of grouping up?

The mana breathers, in contrast, were faring better.

Unlike the ordinary students who had outright collapsed, they were all still on their feet, chatting lightly among themselves. Most of their comments revolved around complaints about the instructor.

Even though no one paid me any mind, one person was still staring at me intently: Golden Sunshine.

It wasn’t hostility or malice. His gaze was filled with pure curiosity, but that only made it worse. It was so oppressive that I almost wished he were glaring at me with ill intent instead.

In both my past life and this one, I had never encountered such relentless scrutiny. It scared me. What did he see in me? Maybe he really was a stereotypical playboy with bleached-blond hair, tanning, and a shameless appetite for women.

I wasn’t particularly remarkable, but if he was the type who didn’t care, then…

The thought that this notorious womanizer might have set his sights on me made my skin crawl.

Even though my body was female, my mind wasn’t. Just imagining such a scenario made me nauseous.

Stop thinking about it. Don’t let your imagination run wild. Focus on the cube. If I concentrate on that, I can forget about it.

The cube was clearly no ordinary object. Judging by how casually the instructor had pulled it out earlier, he’d done this plenty of times.

The worn bandages wrapped around the handle were stained a sickly yellow and reddish-brown, as if soaked with the pain and despair of its previous victims.

Blood. That’s definitely dried blood.

I could picture a student’s palms getting shredded as they stubbornly tried to lift it.

The fact that Georg hadn’t even bothered to clean it said a lot about his character.

The moment I gripped the handle, I could feel the malice of whoever had designed this thing.

Its structure was deliberately unbalanced, causing it to slip if I tried to lift it with both hands. It was made to be as difficult as possible to handle.

I pulled with all my strength, but it didn't budge, not even a millimeter.

I doubted anyone but a late-stage protagonist could lift it with one hand.

No matter how I adjusted my posture or tried different grips, the result didn't change.

The only thing I gained was certainty: I couldn't lift it with my strength alone.

"If you're certain it's impossible, you don't have to force yourself. Baek Hoyeon, if you want to give up, just say so."

Physical strength alone wouldn't cut it. It wasn't surprising—I didn't even have the kind of muscles that could pass for "strength." Beasts were supposedly stronger than humans, but only because the weak among them had been culled through harsh natural selection.

Even someone as ignorant as me knew that much.

Mother had once mentioned that entire tribes of beastfolk would vanish in a single day, replaced by new ones.

Children who weren't useful as labor were simply disposed of. If Father hadn't founded the Empire, I might've met the same fate.

Thanks to the Empire's establishment, I had survived, weak as I was. And because I survived, I discovered a unique talent.

"I'll give it a try."

The instructor's gaze seemed to say, Let's see what you've got.

Even as I spoke, doubts crept into my mind.

What if I failed spectacularly? What if I gave Georg another reason to dislike me? He already seemed irritated; handing him ammunition would be a disaster.

I couldn't afford to fail. I had to succeed.

Steeling myself, I reached out with my mind, sending a message deep into the earth veins.

-Child of Onbyeolbi asks the master of this land: are you here?

No response came. I called out again, knowing some gods enjoyed ignoring mortals until mana had already been used, only to show up afterward and rebuke them.

-This is Baek Hoyeon, child of Onbyeolbi. I ask the master of this land: are you present?

-"Who disturbs my slumber? My faith has faded, and the earth veins have stilled. Do you call upon me to mock my feeble state, human?"

It took a long time for a meaningful response.

Clearly, this land's gods were either dead or forgotten, as I'd suspected.

So they really did create fake gods and feed them stolen faith and mana.

It explained why I always felt uneasy near churches or hearing talk of divine mercy.

Those so-called "benevolent and righteous gods" were little more than thieves.

Now's not the time for that.

-I am Hoyeon, child of Onbyeolbi. I ask for permission to use your mana. If I've disturbed your rest, I deeply apologize.

-"Child of Onbyeolbi… I have shown disrespect to an honored guest."

He called Mother “Onbyeolbi.” Did he know her? I wanted to ask, but Georg’s piercing glare reminded me there wasn’t time for pleasantries.

To others, it probably looked like I was just standing there, eyes closed, doing nothing.

-Forgive my rudeness, but I must ask urgently. May I use your mana?

-“Mana, you say. I wish I could offer you all I have, but you’ve seen this land, have you not? The earth veins are sealed and polluted. With what little remains, I could perhaps split the ground—no more.”

-That will suffice. I don’t need much, only enough to lift what I’m holding.

The presence felt like an elderly man ashamed to admit he had nothing left to give.

My ability to gain a god’s favor was my one redeeming feature. Most shamans and priestesses had to perform extreme rituals to gain their attention. For me, it came naturally.

Still, being watched 24/7 by some divine entity wasn’t always pleasant. Even if their gaze was benevolent, it was suffocating for someone like me.

-Yes, that is all I need.

-“Unlike that other one, you speak with such grace. Perhaps it’s because you’re part human.”

“Baek Hoyeon, how long do you plan to stand there?” Georg’s impatient voice snapped me back.

-I humbly ask for your help.

-“So be it.”

***

Georg’s teaching philosophy was unwavering.

When it came to education, rank and status held no value. There was only the teacher and the student.

That was a principle he would never compromise, no matter who objected.

Of course, as a pure-blooded elf, he still saw himself as inherently superior, even if his late comrade—the hero—had scolded him for this arrogance.

From the moment Baek Hoyeon transferred in, she rubbed him the wrong way. A beastfolk student? It was enough to rattle his pride. But to hear that the Academy's headmaster had personally ordered her special treatment, citing her potential danger? Outrageous.

So, watching Hoyeon stand there, eyes closed, not even trying to lift the kettlebell, only deepened his displeasure.

"Baek Hoyeon, when will you—?"

Before he could finish, an ominous energy filled the room. A malevolent aura he hadn't felt since the Demon King's defeat wrapped itself around Hoyeon.

Impossible. The Demon King hadn't resurrected, and the seal was intact. Yet Georg recognized the energy immediately: magic of the highest order.

Without a word, Hoyeon gripped the kettlebell. The earth itself seemed to respond, lifting the heavy object with her until it reached her chest.

She turned to Georg and said calmly, "I've lifted it. May I leave now?"

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 9

Chapter 9: Hellish Gym Class (4)

Whether I succeeded or failed, I would have drawn attention regardless.

However, now that I had stepped up, I regretted not just quietly declaring my surrender from the start.

Until just moments ago, the students who had been lounging around or busy gossiping about the instructor were now all staring at me.

Their expressions carried various emotions, but one thing was universal.

Doubt. Their faces varied, but their eyes screamed disbelief—”Could a girl who doesn’t even know magic or mana control possibly pull that off?”

Especially Georg. His face had gone beyond shock and turned completely ashen.

Dealing with the weight of my golden sunlight insignia was hard enough, but now everyone was staring at me as if to say, Who is this girl? I felt like the cream bread and steak I’d eaten earlier were about to make a reappearance.

I couldn’t let that happen. Puking on my first day at this academy would be a social death sentence. Already, I could faintly taste salt in my mouth.

This was bad. It was definitely coming up.

…This was all because Georg had to test me. Messing with an outcast's pride like this was bound to end badly.

Surrender, huh? If he'd said that to me with such a smug expression, even Buddha himself would have been offended.

Though I knew I'd overreacted and escalated things, there was still some satisfaction in knocking him down a peg.

Even if the momentary joy felt like something out of a loser's delusional daydream, that thrill quickly dissipated.

Even losers and loners squirm when stepped on.

While my mind indulged in its small and pathetic victory, my body was diligently preparing to expel everything I'd eaten. The salty taste in my mouth grew stronger.

I looked desperately between Georg and the cube, waiting for him to respond.

Honestly, I figured he might at least acknowledge my effort by now.

Then again, he might just nitpick, saying it didn't fully leave the ground, or insist that anyone who saw it wouldn't call it "lifting." He seemed like the type.

Just look at his face. Even someone as bad at reading people as me could see it—his expression radiated malice and pettiness. It was even more convincing since he was an elf.

In the original serialized chapters—which barely reached the 20th installment—the protagonist's entry into the academy and eventual harem-building were only vaguely outlined, but even in that short span, the elves' racist tendencies were evident.

"I've lifted it, so I'll be leaving now," I said curtly.

I knew it was rude, and I wasn't sure he'd even let me leave, but I had no time to waste.

My vision was blurring, and just staying upright was a challenge.

Suppressing the rising nausea was making my head spin.

And those stares—those piercing stares that wouldn't stop drilling into me.

"…You, that strength… No, it's too soon to conclude. Fine. You may leave," Georg finally said.

He gave his consent surprisingly easily. It felt for a moment like he wanted to stop me but reluctantly allowed it. I pushed such impure thoughts out of my mind.

Right now, I was too busy feeling infinite respect and gratitude toward my instructor.

Maybe I had been too prejudiced against him.

Without the tinted glasses of "grumpy old elf," I saw him differently. He had never discriminated against me or the other students.

The deep wrinkles that contributed to his harsh appearance now seemed more like the marks of a long, wise life.

As for his overall angry-looking face… Well, some people are just born that way. At least he wasn't unattractive, so that was something.

Though my initial dislike for him had completely dissolved, my nausea hadn't. I bowed deeply to Georg, conveying my heartfelt respect, then hurriedly averted my eyes from the others and rushed out of the gym.

The air outside was still dreadful, and even the warm spring sunshine felt irritatingly unpleasant, but just escaping those stares helped calm my nausea.

The faint saltiness lingering in my mouth hinted that I'd be in trouble if I exerted myself too much, but as long as I avoided pushing myself, I'd be fine.

Having fled the gymnasium like a fugitive, a sudden thought struck me.

I had nothing to do.

In my original world, I would have been busy reading novels or sparring and joking around with my head guard brother.

I'd never have a dull moment. But here, I didn't have anything I particularly enjoyed.

The closest thing might be trailing behind the protagonist, or perhaps reading this world's books.

Chatting with the local god would also be fun, but that felt like a bad idea.

It was like forcing a terminally ill patient into conversation.

Compared to the gods of my homeland, this world's deities felt like they were barely clinging to life on some magical life-support system.

If I tried to talk to them a few more times, I feared they might die outright. The thought terrified me into keeping my distance.

Should I head to the library, then? Surely, an academy this prestigious would have an impressive collection of books.

Filled with hope, I took a step forward—only to realize something.

Where was the library?

I'd barely managed to find the gym. How was I supposed to locate the library on my own? Thinking about it now, it was absurd.

I'd only found the gym by sheer luck after running into my homeroom teacher.

Now, during class hours, there was no one wandering around to ask for directions.

Well, almost no one.

Han Dogeon. He'd been nowhere to be seen since I left the gym.

I assumed he'd gone to the rest area to eat bread and then to the gymnasium, but maybe he'd gotten lost like me.

Perhaps Georg would forgive him too. Despite his grumpy appearance, he was a kind person.

Looking at the clock tower, I saw that P.E. was almost over. Only the fourth period had ended out of six, meaning there were still over two hours left until all classes finished.

…In typical academy stories, characters often storm out of class only to get swept up in various events. But nothing dynamic ever happened to me, a mere side character.

I wasn't particularly disappointed since I hadn't expected much to begin with. Really. Besides, I had no desire to battle evil or uncover dark conspiracies. Those dangerous adventures didn't appeal to me at all.

With plenty of time to spare, I decided to wander the academy to familiarize myself with its layout.

Just as I was about to take a step, someone emerged in the distance, walking slowly toward the gymnasium.

It was Han Dogeon.

Where on earth had he been?

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 10

Chapter 10: A Happy Break (1)

The gentle demeanor Baek Hoyeon had shown in the shelter was gone without a trace.

Her gaze, now brimming with hostility and venom, was fixed on me.

The moment she recognized me, her expression seemed to relax slightly, but that wasn't the most pressing issue—the real concern was that she had left Professor Georg's class.

How did she manage that?

Did she know the mana breathing technique? That seemed plausible.

Children of central nobility or royalty often learned either magic or mana breathing techniques.

It wasn't particularly surprising for someone like her, a princess, to have mastered the latter.

Compared to magic, which relies solely on talent, mana breathing might be a better option despite requiring significant investment of time and money.

But then, did mana breathing techniques even exist on the Eastern Continent?

No, they didn't. In the original story, there was no mention of mana-related practices.

To be sure, I reviewed the settings for the Eastern Continent in my mind.

The area was described as a chaotic region, lacking divine power to suppress magical creatures. If you ventured to the back of a village, it

wouldn’t be uncommon to find A-class monsters roaming freely.

Mana, crucial for either opposing such monsters or wielding magic, was almost nonexistent.

It was a wonder how people managed to survive in such an environment.

Yet, they thrived enough to prepare for invasion wars. Even the most minor foot soldiers were beastkin, possessing strength rivaling or surpassing mana breathing users.

Looking at it now, isn’t this balance irreparably broken?

The imbalance was glaring, but pondering over it further wouldn’t yield solutions.

Besides, unless I succeeded in forming bonds with the heroines, such concerns were meaningless.

For now, my focus should be on aligning events with the original plot and improving my combat skills.

Reassessing Baek Hoyeon, I noted she didn’t seem reliant on mana breathing or magic to accomplish what she had.

Maybe she just relied on raw strength because she’s beastkin. Whether here or on the Eastern Continent, beastkin were consistently described as having absurd physical capabilities, which made more sense.

Whatever the truth, she remained dangerous to approach.

The incident with Anastasia at lunch was proof enough. If possible, it was best to exclude her from the story entirely.

She seemed to show me some form of goodwill, but basing any action on such uncertain feelings was too risky.

If I handled her well, I could potentially erase the incidents from the second arc entirely.

However, a single mistake could hasten disaster. I'd rather tread carefully with assured results than gamble with the fate of the continent.

"Ah, so it's you. Were you lost or something?"

Unaware of my thoughts, Baek Hoyeon greeted me nonchalantly.

Though she still exuded a black aura of sorts, her words lacked any malice or hostility.

There was no need to reveal what she'd been up to, so I responded lightly.

"Yes, the paths are rather complicated."

"Hmm. So, it's not just me then. I see, I'm not the only one who got lost."

I had assumed she confidently strode off to the gymnasium, but apparently, she hadn't even known where it was.

At this point, shouldn't the academy provide campus maps?

I had preemptively memorized the layout, so I knew where everything was.

But if the original Iris, Baek Hoyeon, and several other students frequently got lost, then the issue clearly wasn't just individual clumsiness.

Seeing her smile softly for some reason made my heart waver slightly.

Could I… No, maybe it's possible to win her over.

"By the way, have you eaten any bread?"

She's still thinking about that? I'd pegged her as someone indifferent to others, but apparently, she had a surprisingly attentive side.

Her earlier clash with Anya now seemed even more puzzling.

I hadn't known her long, but she struck me as rather unpredictable.

Unstable people were always more difficult to deal with. Realizing that, I managed to steady my heart. People like her were better left alone. They were usually in trouble.

“Yes, thanks to you, I had a hearty meal.”

There was no need to mention that it hadn’t even been filling. I simply gave the answer she seemed to expect. Whether it was her beastkin nature or not, her emotions were plain to see.

She raised her tail stiffly……I want to believe that’s a sign of happiness, but wasn’t her tail up like that when she talked to Anya, too?

That left me with two possibilities. Either she had been just as pleased while exuding killing intent at Anya, or she was masking her true feelings, both then and now, for reasons unknown.

Either way, getting closer to her remained perilous.

***

Hearing that he’d enjoyed the bread I gave him made me oddly happy. He hadn’t said it was delicious, but “filling” meant close enough.

I remembered when I once told a friend I’d treat them to a meal.

They’d laughed, saying, “I wouldn’t even eat steak if you were paying.” Since then, I had mostly stopped offering, and it felt strange to be on the giving end now.

Back then, I’d told them not to steal drinks from my fridge if they weren’t going to accept my food.

But they’d replied, “That’s different,” and continued as if it were normal. Annoying as they were, they had been my only real conversation partner.

When I got into university, they’d mocked me for going somewhere “exactly like you would.” I couldn’t tell if it was an insult or a backhanded compliment, but thinking of them now felt oddly nostalgic.

Anyway, I couldn’t keep holding up someone who was already late.

While I was sure the professor would be lenient, that didn’t make tardiness acceptable.

“Well, if you’ve eaten your fill, that’s good. I’ve held you up long enough. Go on; you’re already late.”

Just as I thought the conversation was over, Han Dogeon called out again.

“Your Highness, may I ask you something?”

“Your Highness? Just use my name. Humbling oneself is admirable, but aren’t we all just students here?”

Overly polite treatment felt out of place this far from home. And coming from the protagonist, it was even stranger.

Thinking about how courteous he was now, compared to how brazen he’d be in private later, was jarring.

“…Then, Hoyeon?”

Nope, nope, nope. Too much.

“That feels… a little too casual, doesn’t it?”

Even as I spoke, I felt inconsistent. Hearing my name spoken so casually by a man stirred my blood in ways I couldn’t explain. I wasn’t sure why, but it left a strange impression.

“Then I’ll call you Hoyeon-nim.”

“That’s acceptable.”

“Yes, Hoyeon-nim. Then, may I ask… during class, did the professor insult or reprimand you in any way?”

Though still formal, his tone struck a balance. However, the question was odd. As if Professor Georg would ever do such a thing.

“I don’t know why you’re asking, but no. Nothing of the sort.”

“That’s a relief… He’s notorious for his temper. There are stories of him knocking out the Imperial Crown Prince for insolence. I was worried something similar might happen.”

Why are you worried about me? What a strange man.

And the Crown Prince? That had to be an exaggeration. Though the professor’s teaching could be rough, he was a kind man despite his fearsome appearance. Such rumors were likely the work of spiteful nobles who had faced his discipline.

Nobility was always shrouded in toxic gossip. The professor had probably punished some wayward aristocrat, only for them to twist the story in retaliation. Stories always grew as they spread, after all.

Still, knocking out the Crown Prince? That was pushing it.

“…I’m not sure why you’re so concerned, but thank you.”

Rejecting someone’s concern outright felt unnecessarily cruel. Though Dogeon’s expression momentarily wavered, he soon gave a polite farewell and headed toward the gymnasium.

Ah, right. I meant to ask him about the library’s location. How foolish of me.

Then again, considering how he’d wandered aimlessly all through the fourth period, he might not have been much help.

However, from earlier, I’d been feeling an unfamiliar gaze on me. It wasn’t the overwhelming pressure from Geum Taeyang’s challenges. This was more insidious, like a street preacher sizing up potential marks.

The feeling had persisted since my conversation with Dogeon. I'd dismissed it, thinking it would fade, but the gaze lingered.

Anxiously, I glanced around. Nothing but rustling leaves and empty pathways. Still, I was certain someone was watching me. Summoning courage, I called out in a quiet voice, afraid to draw attention.

"…Show yourself."

No one answered. Perhaps I'd imagined it in my exhaustion. Feeling foolish, I sighed and resumed walking.

"…I didn't expect you to actually notice me."

There was someone there.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 11

Chapter 11: A Happy Break (2)

Lunch tea time should have been a relaxing moment, but the only one at ease was the girl sitting across from Iris.

She appeared serene, her eyes gently closed, but her inner thoughts were far from as beautiful as her outward demeanor suggested.

With long golden hair and a calm, gentle expression, she might have seemed kind. But in truth, she was a cruel sadist.

Those who had been used by her cursed her as an irredeemable wretch.

Those ruined by her influence wailed her name in anguish, damning her existence. Yet, she paid no mind to any of it.

Why would she? They were nothing but rabble, barking their frustrations to no avail.

To Stefania, it mattered little what such trifles thought. To her, they were toys—meant to be played with and discarded.

The only things that mattered were her own amusement and those who stood above her.

That's why she liked Iris.

It was rare to find someone among the nobility who knew their place, someone who tried so earnestly—albeit clumsily—to please her.

And Iris's helpless, trembling compliance, even when treated as beneath her, was a source of twisted fascination for Stefania.

She was too precious to discard after a mere few games.

Sending Baek Hoyeon to gather intelligence on the Baek Empire was of little consequence.

Stefania's true intent had simply been to delight in seeing Iris struggle, panicking as she stumbled through her task.

Yet, when Iris returned with unexpected information, how could Stefania resist rewarding her? That was the reason she had suddenly summoned Iris today—to give her a well-deserved reward.

"Iris?"

"…Lady Stefania."

Hearing Iris's voice, still thick with tears as though she'd been crying on her way over, pleased Stefania greatly.

"You should drink before the tea gets cold, yes? I had it prepared just the way you like. Or perhaps you're not in the mood today?"

She considered teasing Iris further, imagining all the ways she could make the girl squirm.

But Stefania restrained herself, fearing she might break her plaything. After all, this meeting was meant to reward Iris, not punish her.

Stefania wanted to enjoy Iris's company for a long time.

"N-no… It's just…"

"Pausing is fine, but you really should drink it quickly, don't you think?"

Iris felt as though she were staring down a venomous snake. Stefania's smile, though charming on the surface, carried an unmistakable threat.

Iris was certain that one day Stefania would strike, sinking her fangs deep.

Even so, Iris couldn't cut ties with her. Her family's lives, the rise and fall of their noble house—all of it depended on Stefania's whims.

The teacup extended to her felt like a poisoned chalice. Resigning herself to her fate, Iris swallowed the tea, lamenting both her family's dependence and her own powerlessness.

The tea was the perfect temperature—not too hot, not too cold—with a smooth texture and a delightful aroma.

It was so well-made that, for a brief moment, Iris found herself thinking that Stefania could win a tea-brewing competition at the Academy.

"Well then, shall we discuss the Baek Empire's current situation?"

So it had come to this. Placing the teacup back on the saucer without making a sound, Iris steeled herself.

What would be taken from her this time? How far would she be tormented today?

"But before that, I have a question. Your uncle—he was said to have been struck and then deported while engaging in missionary work on the eastern continent, yes?"

"Ah… Yes. But why do you bring that up now…?"

"Hmm. You've done well, Iris. That's all I needed."

What was happening? Iris wracked her brain for answers but came up empty.

Then why had Stefania sent her to Baek Hoyeon? None of it made sense.

Stefania, noticing Iris's efforts to piece things together, found her adorable and reached out to pat her on the head.

For Stefania, it was an act of bestowing a reward. For Iris, it was the ultimate humiliation.

"So… is this the end of today's meeting…?"

“Just a bit more petting, and then you may go.”

Stefania’s hand ran through Iris’s well-maintained violet hair, relishing the silky texture. This had become a habit of hers; she often petted Iris like a beloved pet.

To an outsider, the sight of a third-year student petting a first-year might have looked like a tender sisterly moment. But anyone who knew the truth would cast Iris a pitying gaze.

Hiding her shame at being so demeaned,

Iris prepared to leave. Stefania bid her a gentle farewell, reminding her to be cautious on the complicated path to the gymnasium.

Always so naïve, Stefania thought, organizing the information she had gathered.

First, the Baek Empire was now in a state tolerant enough—or perhaps lenient enough—to pardon those spreading subversive ideologies.

Missionaries who had previously gone to the Baek Empire hadn’t even returned as corpses. This time, however, one had been beaten but was sent back alive and intact—a first.

Second, the Baek Empire’s focus had shifted westward. Baek Hoyeon’s attendance at this academy was solid evidence of that.

Whether they sought conquest or peace, Stefania didn’t particularly care.

That decided, she thought it was time to start making connections. With a simple wave of her hand, the table and teacups began to blur and fade. As she left, the space she had occupied showed no trace she had ever been there.

***

Wait, was someone really hiding and eavesdropping on me while I was talking to Dogeon?

Suspicious. A busty blonde with slit eyes? That was plenty suspicious on its own. I know it's wrong to judge people based on appearances, but slit eyes?

They're always the ones who pretend to be allies but turn out to be traitors later on.

A classic "Sorry, but I was a mole all along!"

"I must apologize for testing you, Princess. Or rather, should I address you as Lady Hoyeon?"

"…And you are?"

Who are you? Seriously, you're so suspicious it's almost funny.

Popping up out of nowhere, all polite and slit-eyed—it's like you're trying not to be trustworthy.

Maybe I'm being too quick to judge someone by their appearance.

After all, I once thought Master Georg was kind hearted when I first saw him.

"My name is Stefania. Compared to the Baek Empire's splendor, I am merely the humble owner of a small merchant guild."

I'd just vowed not to judge people prematurely, but this constant stalking still didn't make sense.

More importantly, I had no idea who she was. It would have been faster to list the people I did know; there's not much one can learn in twenty chapters.

Even so, I'd memorized all the profiles and even the R-rated chapters, and her name hadn't appeared anywhere.

"…You seem reluctant to trust me. Understandable. Even I wouldn't want to meet with a spy."

The way she spoke as though wounded made me feel guilty.

I had no idea why, but somehow I felt like I was the bad guy here.

Strange. I was the victim, but now I felt like trash. Seeing her looking so pitiful, I decided to at least hear her out.

“Hah, so what’s your business?”

It was probably something along the lines of Do you know the way? Or maybe she was trying to sell something.

She did say she was a merchant guild owner.

Though she was clearly at fault, why did I feel like I was the one losing? I couldn’t put my finger on what exactly was bothering me.

“Thank you for your generosity. What I came to ask is…”

I could already smell the sales pitch. The excessive flattery, the persistence in conversation, and then the seamless switch to a business smile when getting to the point—it screamed scam artist.

People like that latch onto a sucker and refuse to let go, and I really didn’t want to deal with her.

I had memories of someone barging in and practically forcing me to buy something with barely disguised threats.

She gave off that same vibe, and it made me uneasy.

“If it’s not too much trouble, I would like to invite Lady Hoyeon to tea this evening. What do you think?”

Tea time? Just tea?

Was it really just tea? Wouldn’t there be a group of girls there, giggling and gossiping about someone behind their back?

This was a trap. They wanted to use tea time as an excuse to publicly humiliate me. The thought made me desperate to avoid it.

All I wanted was to attend the academy in peace, but why did things like this keep happening? With a sigh, I pondered how to decline in the most noble way possible.

“I’d prefer the library over tea today. Perhaps another time.”

That should have been polite enough, right? Maybe my tone was too stiff, but by now it was second nature and hard to avoid.

“Ah, so you prefer books over tea. I see. I’ll respect your wishes. But should you ever wish to join me for tea, even later…”

She handed me what looked like a crystal orb.

“…just call for me. I’m always listening.”

“Am I supposed to rub it or something?”

“No, it’s just a gift. Isn’t it beautiful? It’s a rare gemstone found in dragon nests. I only wish to foster good relations with you.”

A bribe, essentially.

…Receiving it made me feel like a terrible person. To me, it looked like plain glass, but given her explanation, it must have been outrageously expensive.

Still, her earlier comment about always listening unsettled me. It was practically a confession to stalking. I tried to convince myself she wasn’t a bad person, but my suspicions lingered.

Even so, I had no intention of refusing a free gift. It was pretty, after all.

“…Fine. I’ll take it.”

“Thank you for accepting my sincerity.”

“…”

“…”

Neither of us seemed to have more to say, so an awkward silence settled. Breaking it, I decided to ask her where the library was.

“Do you know where the library is?”

“Yes, the clock tower you see over there serves as one.”

“Thank you.”

I bid her farewell and hoped she wouldn’t try to stop me.

To my surprise, she let me go without a fuss.

I’d expected her to be clingy, but she was unexpectedly straightforward about it.

Maybe she was a good person after all.

Perhaps the sinister aristocratic society I imagined was just a product of my paranoia.

Maybe her tea parties were genuinely about tea.

Her expression had briefly shifted when I thanked her, but it was probably nothing.

No matter how suspicious someone seemed, it was only proper to thank those who helped you.

Even if they were a slit-eyed stalker. If she was offering me tea and gems, maybe she really did want to be friends.

It might have been wishful thinking, but if that were true, then Stefania could be my first friend at the academy.

…So surely, this gaze must be one of kindness.

Ignoring the spine-chilling sensation of being watched, I made my way to the library.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 12

Chapter 12: A Happy Break (3)

Fortunately, I made it to the library-slash-clock tower without any detours.

From its height, it was probably the tallest structure at the academy.

As I stood marveling at its design, one thing became apparent.

This place is way too small to be a library.

Sure, it was tall, but there didn't seem to be enough space inside to fit anything.

For a moment, I wondered if it was just a hollow column. But if that were the case, wouldn't it have collapsed long ago from shoddy construction? Still, the windows suggested there was something inside.

Or maybe this is one of those fantastical settings where things don't collapse, no matter how lazily they're built, because of some durable, magical material.

Even so, the interior seemed way too cramped to house a library.

That is, until I went inside.

Inside the tower, it was more fantastical than I could have imagined.

The library was massive, far more spacious than the exterior suggested.

Its height also seemed to stretch endlessly, much taller than it looked from outside.

The space must have been at least ten stories high. Staff members bustled about, managing books with clockwork efficiency or scrubbing the floors.

The sight was enough to make me think this place was just another one of those spots where nobles poured their excessive wealth.

I found it odd at first that there wasn't the usual smell of books in the air. Then I realized it was probably because they kept the place so meticulously clean.

Some people even dislike the smell of books, so maybe this library was designed with such individuals in mind.

The air felt a little stifling, likely due to the warped magical energy that powered the place. But I was too busy being awestruck to complain.

For the first time, I truly felt like I was in a proper fantasy world.

Sure, lifting a piece of land or chatting with gods was plenty fantastical. But those were things I'd grown accustomed to since childhood.

When you're used to something, it doesn't feel as special anymore.

After all, in my 19 years as Baek Hoyeon, I'd spent almost 14 of them in conversations with gods. Lifting land at my request? That was practically a trivial favor.

Honestly, their constant offers to help had been more of an inconvenience than anything else. Now that I was separated from them, though, I felt a twinge of loneliness.

No, no. Let's stay happy. Fantasy world. Happy thoughts.

"Please present your student ID."

Before I could dwell on anything gloomy, someone who looked like a librarian approached me, asking for my student ID.

I vaguely remembered that first-years typically received their IDs a month after enrollment. Assuming the same applied here, I responded casually.

"I'm a first-year."

“First-year students were issued their IDs collectively on the day of the entrance ceremony. Did you lose yours?”

Was this person human? Despite being made of flesh and blood, they felt mechanical.

So, IDs were handed out at the entrance ceremony, huh? Not exactly welcome news, considering I hadn’t received mine.

“…I’m a transfer student.”

I hoped being a transfer student might grant me an exception, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t.

Judging by how the teachers had treated me on my first day, I wasn’t expecting any special accommodations.

Teachers usually go out of their way to help transfer students, but my homeroom teacher had avoided me outright.

“Updating information… Reviewing Administrative Order 342. Apologies, but exceptions do not apply to transfer students.”

Of course. Nothing ever goes my way. I could already picture my homeroom teacher telling me there were special circumstances and that my ID wouldn’t be ready until the second semester.

The same excuses would likely apply to field trips or sports festivals, too.

…I shouldn’t have left home.

What business does a socially awkward shut-in like me have attending an academy? I could’ve just stayed in bed, instead of throwing a fit about wanting to enroll.

If someone had dragged me here against my will, at least I’d have someone to blame. But no, this was all on me.

So now what? I didn't have anything to play with, no friends to chat with, and no gods to talk to… Well, they're technically there, but it's not the same.

I considered going back to see Dogeon, but returning so soon after leaving felt strange.

I'd probably come across as mentally unstable. With that in mind, it seemed like there wasn't much for me to do outside.

Visiting Anastasia was also out of the question—I didn't know where she was, and showing up uninvited would be rude. That left one option: heading back to my dorm and going to sleep.

Fine. I'll be the shut-in I'm meant to be. I can unpack my luggage, write in my journal—there's stuff to do. No need for it to be academy-specific.

Just as I was about to leave the library, a voice called out from behind me.

"Reviewing Administrative Order 1453 from the Headmaster… Provide… to student Baek Hoyeon. Confirmed. Cross-referencing data… Confirmed. Welcome, Miss Baek Hoyeon. Apologies for the inconvenience. Please feel free to use the library at your leisure."

I didn't understand what this "administrative order" was, why my name had come up, or what kind of data they'd cross-referenced.

But I figured it meant I was allowed in now. Hesitant, I walked past the librarian-like figure. They didn't stop me.

…Whatever they were supposed to provide, it was probably some kind of accommodation for me as a transfer student. No point overthinking it, so I headed inside.

The library was quiet and sparsely populated.

A few students were scattered about, some buried in books for study, others reading for leisure.

The atmosphere was tranquil.

Most people barely glanced at newcomers before returning to their own business.

One student who briefly looked at me had such pronounced dark circles under their eyes that I found myself silently rooting for them.

Hang in there. They wouldn't hear it, but I sent them my encouragement anyway as I began considering what to read.

Etiquette books seemed like a good choice—something about the culture, manners, or common sense of this world and continent.

But would a sophisticated library like this even have something so basic? For students attending this academy, such knowledge was probably considered common sense.

"Etiquette of the Empire: A Guide to Avoiding Mistakes."

There it was. On the fourth floor, in the sociology section, labeled as a recommended book of the month.

The spine showed signs of wear, the corners rounded from frequent handling. Clearly, it was a popular read.

I'd expected heavy tomes with serious titles, like The Prince, but instead, I found attention-grabbing titles.

Amused by the universal appeal of sensational book titles, I opened the cover with a small chuckle.

***

"Get up."

It was less a lesson and more an act of cruelty. Everyone left standing, including Han Dogeon, felt the same. No one could understand why survival training required running laps until they collapsed.

“Stand up. This is the class you chose to remain in, Han Dogeon. Rise with sheer willpower.”

Ordinary students had already dropped, and even those using mana-breathing techniques were sprawled on the ground.

The few students still conscious could only wonder, in their fading awareness, how this professor hadn’t been fired yet.

“You didn’t uncover the secrets of the arcane with this pathetic level of resolve, did you?”

Sprawled on the ground, Dogeon reflected. While earning the professor’s recognition had been nice, he should’ve considered what came afterward.

He’d known about unlocking the mysteries of the Kettlebell spell and the subsequent one-on-one training with Georg. But he hadn’t expected this grueling process in between.

Ultimately, though, his plan had succeeded. Being personally trained by a former mage from the Hero’s Party was a huge win. Sure, his body would suffer, but the trade-off was worth it.

Stretching out his arms to push himself up, Dogeon collapsed again. Even with the advantages of reincarnation, his body couldn’t withstand such extreme exertion.

“…Reset.”

When the students came to, they found themselves lined up on the field as if nothing had happened. Their stamina had been fully restored.

Dogeon was the only one who grasped what had occurred. In that brief moment, the professor had healed every student and repositioned their bodies.

Healing was supposed to be a cleric’s domain.

How is this man even a mage?

Still, Dogeon found it reassuring. A monster like this teaching him magic was bound to produce results.

“If you don’t understand what just happened, don’t worry. But consider this: why did I make you run?”

It doesn’t matter what you answer. With a personality like his, he’ll tell you it’s wrong anyway. At least, Dogeon mused, the professor didn’t treat Hoyeon that way.

As someone who believed himself the only person in this world who understood the Baek Empire’s strength, Dogeon felt a contradictory compulsion to protect Hoyeon from the plot while keeping her uninvolved.

If anyone harmed her, intentionally or not…

Her parents wouldn’t sit idly by.

Resolving to bring forward any events that could be expedited—while ensuring Hoyeon remained safe—Dogeon steeled himself once more.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 13

Chapter 13: A Happy Break (4)

"…So, unless it's a private setting, avoid clapping your hands. It's highly discouraged."

So, that's the story behind it.

In conclusion, clapping at someone unfamiliar was equivalent to telling them to "drop dead" or cursing them with something equally severe.

It wasn't that clapping had always been forbidden. In this world, too, it was once considered a normal expression of celebration.

That was until an assassin group emerged, using clapping as their signal to commence operations.

As ridiculous as that sounds, their success rate was apparently 90%.

They even managed to assassinate both the Emperor and the Pope.

Knowing this, it was a little easier to understand why clapping was banned.

Still, it raised questions. Couldn't they just improve their security instead of banning people from clapping?

The most absurd part was that banning clapping led to the assassin group's collapse. But even after the group disappeared, the fear they'd instilled in people remained. Two hundred years later, clapping was still taboo.

I had inadvertently clapped in front of my professor earlier. Thinking about it now, I was lucky no one had clapped for me this morning when my name was called. I had felt a bit hurt, but it was probably for the best.

Beyond that, there wasn't much else odd in the customs I'd read about. Don't slurp when eating.

Don't cross your legs. Don't laugh too boisterously—basic etiquette.

Nothing required as much caution as clapping did.

These were common-sense rules, after all.

Even though I couldn't shake off the feeling of being unfairly criticized by a fictional world, I found the book surprisingly entertaining.

After placing it back on the shelf, I noticed the clock indicating that gym class was over.

Time flew by, huh? The book hadn't seemed that thick.

I considered leaving the library, but was there really a need? The air might be a little uncomfortable, but with so many books to read, was there any reason to go outside? I didn't think so.

Still, my body had already wandered to the window. The scheduled activities must have ended, as I noticed some students buzzing with excitement while others slouched in exhaustion.

Among them, I spotted a small girl being dragged somewhere by a group of female students.

At a distance, I also noticed Geum Taeyang walking alone, maintaining a deliberate separation from the others. It seemed our class had finished their lesson.

The only one missing was Dogeon, which was surprising, but something else soon drew my attention away.

Geum Taeyang had entered a secluded alley and was casually approaching a woman dressed as a nun. After saying something to her, she reluctantly started following him.

Wait a second—this is definitely suspicious. Could it be one of those situations where a delinquent exploits a devout nun's weaknesses to do something indecent in secret?

No, I'd promised myself not to judge people based on assumptions. Resolving to avoid bias, I continued watching them.

Still… It sure looked like that. Should I intervene? But what could I do? Despite being overshadowed by Professor Georg, Geum Taeyang was no pushover physically.

It felt like I'd stumbled onto the academy's darker side. I'd known the story wasn't all sunshine, but seeing it first hand left me unsettled.

…Maybe I could casually stroll past them, feigning coincidence.

In risqué comics, that usually made things worse, but this world wasn't a risqué comic. Surely it was worth a shot.

Given the academy's emphasis on reputation, Geum Taeyang would likely stop if he had even an ounce of shame or social awareness.

Though I couldn't untangle whatever twisted relationship they had, I could at least prevent things from escalating.

While I debated, they moved deeper into the alley. Geum Taeyang walked leisurely, but the nun's steps seemed awkward and hesitant.

Suspicion turned to certainty.

Should I "coincidentally" pass by and stop whatever's happening? I wasn't a man, but ignoring injustice pricked at my conscience. Even an introvert like me had a sense of right and wrong.

Not that I planned to march up and shout, "Stop!" That sounded like a surefire way to get beaten.

If I was lucky, a beating would be the worst outcome. The worst case… I didn't want to think about it.

Was it really my place to step in? Maybe I should call a teacher instead.

But the teachers were clearly avoiding me. Hesitating any longer could result in the nun facing something humiliating or worse. Could I really just stand by?

…Alright. I made up my mind. I'd walk close enough to be noticed but far enough to maintain plausible deniability.

If nothing happened, that wasn't my fault. If something did, I'd have stopped it. Either way, I'd win.

If I could rescue a helpless nun with just a few steps, it'd be worth the risk.

With my resolve set, I felt lighter. I headed toward the alley.

***

Ethan didn't understand why he'd been sent to this academy.

All he knew was that the goddess had issued an oracle to dispatch another apostle to the academy where Ena resided.

He didn't question the goddess's will. What puzzled him was why the church had chosen him for the mission.

How could someone with his lackluster skills and achievements outrank his seniors for such an honor? The only thing he could boast of was his relatively useless ability to sense demonic energy.

It didn't take long for him to deduce the real reason for his assignment.

The transfer student, Baek Hoyeon, shrouded in mystery save for her origin in the eastern continent, wasn't even bothering to conceal her demonic aura.

Others, including the instructor, had likely sensed it as well. But Ethan didn't care about that.

If I eliminated her…

A meteoric rise in rank would be guaranteed. He might even reach the top ten apostles. For Ethan, the 13th apostle, such a prospect was incredibly tempting.

Sure, he might be expelled, but that didn't concern him. As long as it brought him closer to the divine, it was a small price to pay.

But failure would mean more than expulsion. The church would abandon him; the 13th seat among the apostles changed hands frequently.

Given her confidence in wielding demonic power openly, she must have the strength to back it up.

Ethan knew he couldn't act recklessly. His rudimentary mana-breathing technique wouldn't suffice.

Thus, all he could do was watch as Baek Hoyeon left the gymnasium. Even the commotion caused by a student uncovering the instructor's tampering with the kettlebell barely registered with him. His thoughts were wholly consumed by her.

After class, Ethan retrieved a pendant—the church's communication device for apostles.

He'd never used it before.

His assignments had always been mundane enough to handle alone.

Now was the time. Yet he hesitated.

If he asked Ena for help, they could undoubtedly subdue Baek Hoyeon. But she would likely claim most of the credit. Acting alone, however, seemed nearly impossible.

"…Sister Gloria, I have urgent news."

Ethan exercised restraint. Better to ensure success, even if it meant sharing credit. He decided to seek assistance from the first apostle.

Gloria (through pendant): “Decatria? Call me Ena instead. There are many ears here.”

Ethan: “Yes, Ena. I’ll get straight to the point. A user of demonic power has appeared.”

Ena: “…Demonic power? At the academy?”

Ethan: “Yes. Do you know of the student named Baek Hoyeon?”

Ena: “The transfer student from today? From the eastern continent?”

Ethan: “Yes. She openly used demonic power.”

Ena: “…I’ll come to you shortly. We’ll discuss the details in person.”

Ethan pocketed the pendant and headed down the noisy corridors.

It didn’t take long to find Gloria waiting at the entrance to the alley. Walking straight toward her, Ethan spoke.

“You’ve never contacted me first before, Decatria.”

“I didn’t think I could handle this alone.”

“I thought you’d hoard all the credit for yourself. Your judgment is commendable, but… could you not present yourself so sloppily? As an agent of the divine, you should maintain your dignity.”

As they moved deeper into the alley, Ethan wondered briefly why Gloria was commenting on his appearance. He quickly brushed the thought aside.

“My duties are dictated by the goddess, but these tasks are not her explicit commands. As her servant, I refuse to tarnish her image. Looking like a ruffian is sufficient.”

“I’ll respect your perspective. But, Decatria, it seems we’re being followed.”

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 14

Chapter 14: A Happy Break (5)

“…Do you have any guesses as to who it might be?”

Ethan hadn’t even realized they were being followed.

However, he wasn’t foolish enough to deny it when Gloria claimed there was someone tailing them.

If someone like Gloria—a top-tier apostle—said there was someone, it was practically certain.

Given her abilities, she was among the very best, and Ethan was confident that even the academy’s faculty couldn’t match her skills. Perhaps only his gym teacher could come close.

“It’s likely one of Stefania’s underlings. Otherwise, there’d be no reason for someone to carry a magic tool imbued with her distinct aura.”

Ethan recognized the name Stefania. She was the reason Gloria had come to the academy in the first place.

Stefania was considered the de facto leader of the remaining demon worshippers on the continent. The church had sent Gloria to apprehend her.

However, Stefania’s meticulous caution made it difficult for even Gloria, the first apostle, to gain a foothold.

Ethan knew that if he were in Gloria’s position, he wouldn’t have lasted long before being ensnared and erased without a trace.

“…So, you think they’ve been eavesdropping on us?”

“Probably. It’s hard to imagine someone tailing me. And no offense, but your rough appearance and status as a new student make it unlikely you’d attract a follower. Most likely, someone with one of Stefania’s magical tools happened to overhear our communication.”

The goddess may be omnipotent, but the church is not. Ethan wasn’t sure if it was appropriate for Gloria to make such remarks, but he decided not to dwell on it. After all, it was true: the church wasn’t all-powerful.

“…Regardless of the magical tool’s capabilities, the stalker seems amateurish. Their footsteps are too loud, and they’re hovering around us awkwardly. It’s probably just an ordinary noble trying to get on Stefania’s good side in hopes of earning a position.”

Ethan couldn’t sense any of the things Gloria described. He didn’t hear footsteps, nor did he feel anyone hovering around them.

Truly, she was the church’s greatest asset.

Though Ethan possessed the rare talent of sensing demonic energy, standing next to Gloria made him feel utterly inadequate.

She outclassed him not only in magic and physical strength but also in wielding divine power he couldn’t even perceive.

“We should deal with this,” Ethan suggested.

“No, Decatria, you shouldn’t. Hurting an informant gains us nothing and could lead to disciplinary action.”

Was this insight born from her own experiences? Ethan felt a strange sense of camaraderie, though Gloria quickly shattered it.

“They were being annoyingly persistent, so I slapped them once. Ended up with a three-day suspension. If you actually ‘deal with’ someone, who knows what the consequences would be.”

“…What do you suggest we do, then?”

Ethan sighed. Of course, Gloria wouldn't dirty her hands with such matters.

She was an envoy of the Vatican, after all; she had no need to handle the grimy work. That was what people like him were for.

"They don't seem to realize we've noticed them. It's best we part ways here. If they catch on, it could harm my reputation. A nun alone with a thug in an alley… It's enough to start rumors."

"…I haven't reported on Baek Hoyeon yet. Is that alright?"

"I trust you'll handle it. As much as I'd like to assist, I'm already preoccupied with Stefania. A word of advice: the way you've operated won't fly here. Keep that in mind."

"…Understood. Then, we've never met here today."

"Of course."

With that, Gloria bid him farewell and leaped onto the building's wall, disappearing from sight.

Ethan, who had prided himself on his agility, could only laugh bitterly at the gap in their abilities.

Climbing walls and leaping across rooftops were beyond him, so he trudged deeper into the alley, cursing the unfairness of talent.

Meanwhile, Geum Taeyang hadn't made a move on the nun yet. Still, they kept heading deeper into the alley.

Was he thoughtful enough to at least hide himself while attempting something indecent? Outdoors but out of sight—how considerate.

I was about to reevaluate my opinion of Geum Taeyang, but in the end, he was clearly just a scumbag forcing himself on a woman.

I couldn't hear their conversation, but he was probably explaining how he planned to take her now and in the future.

At least, that's how it went in certain stories. Though I couldn't hear their exact words, the situation seemed damning enough.

A nun and a delinquent walking into a secluded alley? The implications were nauseating. To think I shared a class with someone like him.

…Wait, were we even in the same class? It seemed impossible that I hadn't noticed someone so conspicuous. Then again, we'd been in gym class together, so he must have been in my class.

The thought of spending a year taking classes alongside a potential predator made my skin crawl. I couldn't just let this slide for my own safety. I had to confirm what they were up to.

But what would happen if someone bold enough to assault a nun caught me watching? Someone that reckless wouldn't care whose family I belonged to.

As I hesitated, they moved further away. Normally, I would've left it at that, but now I was genuinely considering asking the gods for help.

I'd used mana-breathing earlier during gym class. While it wouldn't do much damage, it could at least restrain someone.

Though I still hesitated to ask the gods for aid, what if my suspicions were right?

Hoping that this version of Geum Taeyang would be one that subverted clichés, I ran toward the last place I'd seen them.

When I arrived, there was no one there.

Had they moved elsewhere? I strained my ears but heard nothing. The lack of any lingering… questionable smells suggested nothing indecent had occurred.

…It was probably safe. I didn't know where they'd gone, but the absence of any evidence pointed to them giving up after realizing they were being watched.

Feeling a bit deflated, I turned back. At least nothing had happened.

But as I turned, I realized I was now facing a three-way fork. Oh, great. Another one of those places. Easy to enter but a pain to exit.

In short, I was lost again. How was it possible to get lost this many times in one day? It wasn't my fault, though. I blamed the academy for not installing basic maps.

Now, which way should I go? Whichever path I chose would probably lead back to the academy, but there was no guarantee I'd end up where I wanted to be. Then again, I hadn't had a specific destination in mind to begin with.

Before I could make a decision, I ran into someone unexpected: Han Dogeon. Judging by his surprised expression, he hadn't expected to see me here either.

"…Miss Hoyeon, what brings you here?"

How could I explain? That I'd run out of the library after spying on Geum Taeyang because I thought he was about to do something bad, only to find nothing? That'd be too embarrassing. No matter my intentions, I'd acted foolishly.

Better to claim I'd gotten lost while wandering. It sounded far more plausible.

"I got lost."

"You seem to lose your way quite often."

Dogeon's observation stung, but I couldn't feel too hurt since it wasn't really my fault.

"The paths are awfully convoluted."

“Were you headed somewhere specific?”

Somewhere specific… I wanted to go back to the library to finish my book, but unpacking my things took priority.

The longer I procrastinated, the more likely I’d leave it until the end of the semester.

“…The fourth dormitory. Do you know the way?”

“You’ve been assigned to the fourth dorm?”

“Yes.”

Even if I forgot everything else, I wouldn’t forget my dorm assignment: Room 44 in the fourth building.

It felt ominous, but the number made it easy to remember. ‘What’s my room again? Oh right, four-four-four!’

“What a coincidence. My room is in the fourth dorm as well.”

“Is that so?”

“…Shall I guide you there?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

If our conversation lacked flow, I blamed it on my father’s formal way of speaking that I’d inherited.

Thinking so, I followed Dogeon as he led the way.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 15

Chapter 15: The End of the Day (1)

As expected of Georg, the former mage of the Hero's Party, Dogeon thought, both the content and methods of his special training defied common sense.

Creating a pocket dimension large enough for people to enter was already astonishing, but manipulating the flow of time inside and outside? That was absurd.

Though three hours had passed inside, only about three minutes had gone by outside.

Dogeon couldn't help but wonder why someone of Georg's caliber was wasting away at the academy.

The academy's reputation was stellar, sure, but it wasn't exactly a fitting place for a former Hero's Party member. The question only deepened his curiosity.

"Well, I should look on the bright side. At least I've learned something invaluable."

Dogeon chose not to overthink it. In the original story, the reason Georg remained at the academy was never revealed, and he left the story around the midpoint.

Until then, Dogeon resolved to extract as much value from him as possible.

"Treating yourself as the center of the world and rewriting the rules… I didn't realize magic had such a concept."

Even if the amount of mana one could wield was limited, believing it with all your heart could amplify a spell's power. This mechanic hadn't appeared in the original work.

Was that why the mage characters in the story had all acted so haughty? Nobles were likely already full of themselves, but the thought of them genuinely believing they were the center of the universe made Dogeon understand everything at once.

Georg's evaluation of Dogeon's magical aptitude had been lukewarm, deeming it "decent." But for Georg, who was notoriously harsh with his assessments, even that much was high praise.

Even Anastasia couldn't escape Georg's sharp critiques, so the fact that Dogeon managed to earn a passing grade spoke volumes about his potential.

Yet, just as Dogeon was starting to feel a bit smug, he spotted Hoyeon heading into an alley. His whole body froze.

Regardless of his talent, a single word from her to her parents would spell his doom.

He needed to show her only the best sides of this continent—certainly not its dirty back alleys.

Without a moment's hesitation, Dogeon followed her. He wasn't worried about being caught; in fact, he hoped she would notice him.

But to his dismay, she ventured even deeper into the alley. What business could she possibly have there?

It didn't take long for him to find her. Standing at a crossroads where several alleys met, she looked completely lost. Approaching her, Dogeon asked with genuine concern:

"…Miss Hoyeon, what brings you here?"

"I got lost."

It was obvious she hadn't gotten lost but had entered the alley intentionally.

Still, Dogeon didn't point it out.

He was relieved nothing had happened, though he couldn't help feeling a twinge of irritation.

His tone betrayed some of his frustration.

"You seem to lose your way often."

"The paths here are overly complicated."

The academy's main roads connected most facilities, so her claim of getting lost after wandering into a back alley felt suspicious. Nevertheless, Dogeon decided not to dwell on it.

There was no point in aggravating their relationship, and his priority was getting her out of the alley.

"Were you headed somewhere specific?"

"…To the fourth dormitory. Do you know the way?"

"The fourth dorm? You have a room there?"

"Yes."

The fourth dorm. Coincidentally, Dogeon's room was there too. He figured this would be a good chance to rest while escorting Hoyeon out of the alley.

Physically, Georg had restored him fully, but the mental strain of the day left him feeling drained.

"What a coincidence. My room's in the fourth dorm as well."

"I see."

Her frosty tone showed no interest in continuing the conversation.

It was as if she was silently saying, I don't care about your circumstances.

In the sanctuary near the World Tree, she had smiled and even shared bread with him.

Why was she now openly radiating displeasure?

Had something happened to sour her mood? If so, did that mean he'd have to take on the role of her confidant too? Dogeon seriously considered it.

She seemed to like him at times, yet at others, she didn't. Her mood swings made her feelings impossible to gauge. And now, less than a day after her arrival, she'd already clashed with the daughter of the Northern Grand Duke. If left unchecked, she might end up making enemies of the entire academy.

Calling it a "clash" was an exaggeration, though. All Hoyeon had done was ask Anastasia where the cafeteria was, but the atmosphere had been so icy that anyone present would have thought otherwise.

Dogeon was convinced.

"…Shall I guide you there?"

"Please do."

He silently led the way. Though he didn't know the exact layout of the alleys, it wasn't a concern. As long as they reached the main road, he could navigate to their destination.

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As I followed him, a thought struck me: Does this guy even know where he's going? He had been nearly an hour late to gym class, and now, trailing behind him, I started to feel uneasy.

Sure, it could have been a coincidence, but maybe he'd been off somewhere flirting with a girl before finally showing up.

Lucky him. Meanwhile, I had nearly been in tears after getting lost for real.

Anyway, he claimed the paths were complicated, and it seemed like he'd gotten lost earlier too.

Was I really following someone who might not even know the way? Or was he lying and actually knew?

Whatever the reason, I couldn't ignore the growing sense of doubt.

"…Do you actually know where you're going?"

He was walking confidently, but I had to ask. The last thing I wanted was to end up in some random place.

"I don't know the exact layout of the alleys, but I know where the facilities are."

"…Didn't you just say the paths were complicated earlier?"

He stopped momentarily, as if caught off guard.

His reaction confirmed my suspicions: he'd lied.

He hadn't gotten lost earlier; he'd probably been off wooing someone.

"Well, that was…"

"Forget it. I won't press you further. Just lead the way."

In hindsight, I'd been too quick to trust him.

Sure, he seemed innocent now, but this was the same guy destined to build a harem. I should keep my guard up.

Dogeon seemed to give up trying to explain himself and walked in silence. The already tense atmosphere grew even more awkward.

Now I feel like I did something wrong. It wasn't like he'd tricked me with fancy noble talk,

yet I felt bad for no reason. He was supposed to be the deceptive, charming protagonist who builds a harem. Why was I the one feeling guilty?

Watching him sulk wasn't satisfying either. If it was my fault, maybe I should console him.

It didn't help that he was good-looking and had a decent personality. If he were ugly or a jerk, I wouldn't even have bothered.

"I wasn't trying to scold you. But if you're going to lie, at least put more effort into it."

"…I'll keep that in mind."

The mood seemed to lighten slightly. His steps grew less heavy, which oddly put me at ease.

Maybe I should've been firmer, warning him that lying is wrong. But that would've only made him resent me.

It wasn't just because he was the protagonist that I wanted to stay on good terms with him—though that was the biggest reason.

Not that I intended to join his harem. I'd keep my distance, just close enough to watch how his story unfolded.

After all, I still thought of myself as a man.

Sure, I wore garter belts, tied up my hair, and had gotten used to wearing women's underwear.

Still, I thought of myself as a man. Even though monthly reminders denied it, and my parents were actively seeking a match for me.

I'm still a man.

“…This might be a rude question, but may I ask?”

I wasn’t about to become part of his harem. Resolving to stay firm, I responded.

“What is it?”

“Back at the sanctuary, you seemed cheerful, but now you’re… quite the opposite. Your expression suggests displeasure. Did something happen to upset you?”

His question caught me completely off guard. Was I really walking around looking annoyed?

“Me?”

“…No, I’m sorry.”

“No, speak freely. Does my face really look that unpleasant?”

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 16

Chapter 16: The End of a Day (2)

“Now, speak properly. Does my expression truly look so severe?”

The most fitting description would be that of being crushed under a calamity of one’s own making. Dogeon couldn’t help but sigh inwardly.

While it was dangerous, it was necessary for Dogeon to check. If something displeased her, he had to step up, empathize with her, and calm her anger.

However, from the very first step, it was as if he had stepped on a landmine. Dogeon mulled it over repeatedly, but no clear way out came to him.

Having had some experience with women in the past, Dogeon knew that this kind of question was a no-win scenario. No matter what flattery he offered, it was bound to incite anger.

Thus, Dogeon decided to defuse the situation by humbling himself.

“…I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked something unnecessary.”

“No, there’s nothing for you to apologize for. I merely want to confirm what kind of expression I’ve been wearing. So, speak.”

Does my expression look severe? Dogeon genuinely felt the weight of her gaze.

He couldn’t even begin to guess what might happen if he told her the truth, considering she already looked displeased.

Still, as he refrained from making that final remark, he believed it wasn’t entirely hopeless. But just then, the final blow came.

“I promise I won’t get angry.”

How could she so precisely act in the way he dreaded most? Dogeon even felt a bit of awe.

In his experience, no woman who said she wouldn’t get angry had ever actually kept that promise.

To him, her words were a thinly veiled threat that she’d explode if he didn’t answer immediately.

And yet, answering was no better—it was like being asked, “Who do you like more, your mom or dad?” Regardless of the response, it would only lower her opinion of him. Fully aware that he was likely coming across as pathetic, he had no choice but to ask.

“…Are you sure… you really won’t get angry?”

“What kind of person do you take me for? I always keep my word. There’s no need to worry—I’m just curious about how I come across.”

Hoyeon intended to reassure him, but to Dogeon, every word she spoke felt like a tightening steel wire.

Dogeon wanted to delay his response as long as possible, but given Hoyeon’s insistence, he couldn’t stall any longer.

“…You haven’t smiled once outside the shelter. That’s what made me think so.”

“So, you’re saying I’ve had this expression everywhere except the shelter.”

Feeling like a prisoner dragged to the gallows, Dogeon waited for her verdict. How would she express her anger? Would she raise her voice? Or would her hand fly first? Frankly, he hoped for a quick and clean end.

As Dogeon projected his past experiences with women onto her, he braced for the worst. But what he expected didn’t happen.

“…I see. Even when I met her… Then, be specific. Exactly what kind of person do I seem like?”

Her words only amplified Dogeon’s anxiety. Though Hoyeon massaged her temples in apparent frustration, to him, it looked like she was lighting the fuse of a bomb.

“I think… you look angry.”

“An angry expression, you say.”

Without saying another word, she simply murmured those words to herself, her expression unchanging. Her silence made Dogeon feel like he had to act immediately to salvage the situation.

“…Perhaps, you could try smiling?”

“You want me to smile?”

Even as he suggested it, Dogeon felt it was a pitiful excuse rather than proper advice—a rushed remark to escape the predicament. Yet, to Hoyeon, it sounded like plausible counsel.

Unbeknownst to him, Hoyeon regarded Dogeon as a master of social interactions—a smooth talker who charmed women and effortlessly garnered goodwill.

So, Hoyeon attempted a smile.

“Like this?”

What she aimed for was a natural and benevolent smile, serene like that of a statue of Buddha.

The result, however, was catastrophic.

Her eyes remained narrowed in a scowl, her eyebrows still arched angrily. Coupled with her aura of ominous intensity, the corners of her mouth were pulled upward in a forced grin, making her look more menacing than ever.

Dogeon wracked his brain for a response but soon gave up. No matter what he said, he’d only worsen his situation. All he wanted was to affirm whatever she did and escape.

“Yes, it looks much better.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

Although her expression now seemed more intimidating than before, neither of them expressed dissatisfaction.

“So, you asked me earlier if I was upset. To answer that, no. Nothing in particular.”

Exhausted from the ordeal caused by one poorly chosen word, Dogeon somehow managed to steer the conversation back to the main topic.

“I see… Then, is there anything that bothers you?”

“Anything that bothers me…”

Hoyeon pondered briefly before responding decisively.

“The air. To be precise, the magic power—it’s oppressive. Suffocatingly so.”

“Magic power…? Not mana?”

Magic power? Was that something mentioned in the original story? While the concept of malevolent energy, or magia, was brought up, Dogeon didn't recall the term "magic power."

"Do you not find the air here stifling?"

"No, I don't feel anything unpleasant."

"Not at all? Even though the air is filled with such suffocating, twisted magic power?"

Dogeon struggled to find a suitable response. He hadn't noticed any oppressive atmosphere or foul scent.

"Perhaps it's because we're in an alley? Even in an academy, maintaining such places might be difficult."

"…Let's go with that."

Though Dogeon found her words curious, he didn't have the energy to dwell on it. Not long after, they emerged near the dormitory.

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The one radiating plausibility as if wrapped in it head-to-toe turned out to be my next-door neighbor.

"…So, you're in the room next door."

"…Seems so."

Building 4, Room 45. That was the room assigned to Han Dogeon. I didn't know who had originally been assigned next to me, but why did it have to be him?

More importantly, what was with the way he subtly ended his sentences with a familiar tone? It irked me far more than not understanding what magic power was.

That sly guy. Slipping closer and closer like this, before I know it, won't he start speaking.

informally as if we're best friends? Our seats in class were already next to each other, and now our rooms too. The stage was perfectly set.

Still, it didn't feel right to outright push away the person who'd pointed out how angry I looked on the streets and even offered advice. Without him, I'd probably still be walking around with a permanently furious expression.

Come to think of it, when I talked to Anastasia earlier, she seemed a little uncomfortable, didn't she? Stephanie didn't seem particularly bothered, though.

It's probably less about my expression and more that Anastasia was just as socially awkward as I was. I mean, I only know about her from reading the novel, but she was meeting me for the first time. Of course, it'd feel awkward.

What should I say to Dogeon, though? “Let’s get along as neighbors”? “Looking forward to being next-door neighbors”? No greeting felt right.

If I initiated a greeting, wouldn’t that look like I was trying to be friendly? That might encourage this *harem master* to immediately start targeting me.

Even Anastasia, the dignified northern duchess, ended up looking cute and vulnerable in bed because of him. If I let my guard down, I could end up in her place.

I had to stay sharp.

“It’s fate that we’re neighbors. I look forward to getting along.”

That smug *extrovert*. He even stole the greeting. Sure, I wasn’t planning to say anything first, but now that he’d said it, it felt like I’d lost.

While I agonized over the perfect greeting, he casually greeted me like it was nothing. I envied someone who could talk to others so naturally.

Or maybe… was this his way of showing interest in me? Coming on strong on the first day? No matter what disguise he wore, was he really the protagonist of a harem story?

“…Sure.”

Unable to come up with anything else, I muttered that and retreated into my room.

Inside, only unpacked luggage and furniture filled the space. The soldiers my father had sent as escorts must have arranged everything.

If I get a day off, I should thank them.

Amaurus Academy had a strict policy against bringing personal servants or staff. The soldiers my father assigned to protect me stayed in nearby accommodations outside the academy.

Since it was a school for nobles, it made sense that a commercial district had developed nearby. That was probably how the author had explained it.

Still, I felt a bit guilty. Was this too much trouble for them? They weren't here on divine orders but because of my father's commands. Even if they didn't show it, they might harbor some resentment.

I could ask them about it next time I meet them. For now, I had to unpack.

Unpacking turned out to be time-consuming due to the sheer amount of luggage, but once I finished, the room finally felt a little like mine.

The details were different, and the smell of the room was unfamiliar, but it was enough to put my mind at ease.

By the time I finished, the sky had turned a rich shade of orange.

Was it dinner time already? I hadn't managed to find anything good for lunch, so this time, I vowed to hunt down a proper meal.

Wait… had Dogeon woken up yet?

While organizing my things, I realized something—snoring had been coming from his room the entire time.

No matter how much money they poured into this place, the technology of this era clearly hadn't reached the point of soundproofing rooms.

The academy's dining hall didn't charge money, but it operated on a strict schedule. If you missed the time slot, you'd go hungry, no exceptions.

Let’s consider this payback for earlier.

I knocked on Dogeon’s door to wake him up.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 17

Chapter 17: The End of a Day (3)

The moment I threw myself onto the bed, I couldn't help but think how utterly exhausting the first day had been.

The daughter of the final boss suddenly transferred in, of all things, and she ended up being assigned the seat next to mine.

Then there was the whole ordeal of her catching me while I was trying to retrieve the World Tree's fruit. Not to mention, getting cornered by her in that alleyway.

When I thought back on it, though, calling it "being cornered" might not have been entirely accurate.

For someone supposedly pressuring me, she hadn't shaken me up or demanded anything in particular.

Having been through actual harassment a few times before, the experience stood out as odd.

Her demeanor and expression exuded the aura of someone pressuring another, but when I looked deeper, there was no substance—no real demand behind her actions.

Maybe it was just the atmosphere back then that had gotten to me.

After all, she was that Onbyeolbi's daughter, and she did exude an intimidating presence like a form of pressure.

The more I thought about her, the harder it was to determine whether she was an ally or an enemy.

Could I even call her a “character”? She didn’t exist in the original novel that served as the basis of this world. Was it even right to label her that?

Regardless of what I called her, she was undoubtedly a threat. Trying to deal with her was like betting all in at poker with just a three-card hand.

With flimsy evidence, one failure would spell the end. If I had something more substantial—like a full house—it might be worth taking the risk. But her attitude was far too erratic to base any judgment on.

This was why I had to approach anything related to Baek Hoyeon with extreme caution.

She had the power to warp the story just by existing, and she’d already caused minor disruptions.

Ideally, I’d keep her close, isolate her from the narrative, and ensure she formed a favorable impression of this continent. But that was a pipe dream.

To see a happy ending, I couldn’t let Hoyeon ruin the events involving the heroines.

Stefania, the antagonist of the first arc, could be dealt with using the support of Gloria and Camilla. Onbyeolbi, however, was on an entirely different level.

One silly idea crossed my mind—an absurd notion, but perhaps worth a fleeting thought.

What if I simply avoided triggering any heroines as love interests? If I didn’t plant any flags at all, would that still count as “conquering all heroines”?

Knowing how fond the author was of wordplay, it might actually… No, that couldn’t be it.

It wasn’t worth considering further.

I’d rather just try to deal with Hoyeon.

At least I wouldn't have to babysit her for all four years at the academy. By the end of the second year, I'd be able to leave, which was some small consolation.

Still, even with my tired mind seeking solutions, nothing came to me. The mere fact that such strange ideas occurred to me was proof of how drained I was.

And then there was Magi. It felt important, yet I had too little information.

Maybe I could look it up in the library or ask Georg. Ultimately, though, I'd probably have to ask Hoyeon directly. From what she'd said earlier, she didn't seem intent on keeping it a secret.

My thoughts, hazy like a fog, refused to flow coherently.

…It's the first day, so maybe this is enough for now.

Normally, I'd only lie down for about ten minutes before wandering around the academy, gathering information or building minor connections with the heroines. But today, I was far too exhausted.

I'd thought about buying Exipri some candy or fetching a scroll with a status window-like function after resting a bit. But at that moment, all I wanted to do was close my eyes.

It would be easier to sneak into the facility and grab the scroll later, before night patrols started. The item didn't have an owner, and it'd be useful to gauge my current level objectively.

Still, why not just give the protagonist a status window from the beginning if you're going to include an item like that in a novel? The thought, meaningless as it was, lingered briefly before I discarded it.

Reflecting on the knowledge I'd acquired today and trying to internalize Georg's teachings was exhausting enough.

On top of that, I'd faced the daughter of the final boss multiple times—it had drained every last ounce of energy from me.

Surely I deserved sleep as a small reward for myself.

The bed, pleasantly cool when I first lay down, had now warmed to a comfortable temperature.

If I stopped forcing myself to stay awake, I'd pass out in no time.

The academy facilities were eerily silent compared to the bustling noise outside.

Magic-enhanced doors ensured that only the room's owner could open them, and the soundproofing, combined with the en suite bathroom, made it feel more luxurious than a mid-tier hotel.

There was no TV or phone, but the packed schedule meant I wouldn't have time for them anyway. Comfort was all that mattered.

Right. Just a little nap.

I knew I had things to do, but I simply couldn't endure anymore. Even though I knew I couldn't keep the promise, I couldn't help but say it aloud.

"Alright… just 30 minutes."

Knock, knock, knock.

…

I knocked on the door, but there was no sign of him waking.

He must have been in an exceptionally deep sleep. With only about 20 minutes left until dinner, I considered shouting, but that would've been rude.

The dormitory's soundproofing was rather poor, after all. I could hear everything happening outside from inside the room.

Though the noise was slightly muffled compared to standing outside, people tend to care only about results.

…I couldn’t just barge in either. If we’d been close friends, I might have done so without hesitation, but we weren’t quite there yet.

Were we even friends? It didn’t feel like an equal relationship.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t reach a satisfying conclusion.

Then again, it’s not like I’d know what friendship felt like. The only person I’d called a friend was that guy.

Well, not entirely—I had acquaintances online. But calling them friends felt like a stretch.

While I was lost in thought, time continued to tick by.

Leaving him behind felt wrong, but dragging him along wasn’t an option if he wouldn’t wake.

…I tried. If he doesn’t wake, it’s not my fault, right?

Feeling lighter, I started heading toward the dining hall. But after a few steps, my feet felt heavy again. He had helped me earlier, after all.

Ah, screw it. If he doesn’t wake up, I’ll just grab him by the collar and drag him.

I grabbed the doorknob to Room 445 and turned it.

The door opened effortlessly.

He hadn’t even locked it while sleeping? Seriously?

Shaking my head at the absurdity, I glanced inside.

The room was sparsely furnished, with only the bare essentials.

For someone I’d pegged as an outgoing type, I’d expected a more personalized space, but it was surprisingly barren.

There weren't even any unpacked belongings that might explain it.

In the middle of the bleak room lay Dogeon, blissfully asleep under the blanket.

He looked so content that I hesitated to wake him. But steeling myself, I spoke.

"It's almost dinnertime. Get up."

"…Five more minutes…"

"If you keep sleeping like this, I'll leave without you. Are you okay with that?"

"…Just five more minutes…"

The way he weakly begged for five more minutes was enough to make me falter.

He clearly had experience with oversleeping. But giving him five minutes would lead to endless delays, so I decided to take a firmer approach.

I lightly tickled his nose with my tail. I didn't barbarically rip the blanket off—doing so would've been incredibly unpleasant, and there was always the slim chance he was in his underwear.

Or worse, wearing nothing. One of my old friends had slept that way, after all.

Back then, I'd thought it was just a thing some people did. But after 19 years in this world, I'd come to realize that he was just a weirdo.

"…Achoo!"

With a loud sneeze, Dogeon finally woke up.

Thankfully, he wasn't like that old friend—he'd collapsed on the bed fully dressed.

Watching him groggily twist his head around, still half-asleep, I wondered if I should've just let him sleep instead of dragging him to dinner.

No, he's Korean. He needs food in his stomach for better sleep. He'll thank me for this eventually.

"Why are you here, Your Highness?"

"I told you just now. It's almost dinnertime."

He had clearly just called me "you," but since he'd just woken up, I decided to let it slide. I wasn't in the mood to tease someone so obviously exhausted.

"No, that's not what I meant… How did you even get in? I'm sure I locked the door…"

Locked the door? It opened just fine…

"You must be imagining things. You're so tired you probably forgot to lock it."

He muttered something about being certain he'd locked it, but I didn't have the luxury to wait around. I could already hear movement outside—others were heading to dinner.

"Are you awake now? Then let's go."

"…Go where?"

"Where else? The dining hall. Lead the way."

"But the dining hall shouldn't even be open yet…"

"Don't you realize? If we're late, we won't have the chance to leisurely choose our food."

If we arrived late, we'd be left with scraps. I wanted to browse at my leisure and find something I liked.

With so many options, surely there'd be at least one dish I'd enjoy.

"Oh, I see…"

"Do you want to freshen up first?"

"No, I'm fine. Shall we go?"

As we stepped out of the room, I spotted students gathering and descending the stairs in small groups.

And in the distance, Anastasia was watching me.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 18

Chapter 18: The End of a Day (4)

As the representative of those who had suffered at the hands of Baek Hoyeon and her guards—whether in small or significant ways—Anastasia had come to confront her directly.

Yet, she found herself unsure of how to proceed.

In Anastasia's mind, Hoyeon was a girl who, though pretty in appearance, exuded an air of danger.

However, she also reminded Anastasia of herself in certain ways.

When they first met, she'd only seen the former—a dangerous presence.

But after a single conversation, Anastasia had begun to consider Hoyeon as someone similar to her.

The awkwardness in Hoyeon's speech betrayed the telltale signs of someone who struggled to interact with others, much like Anastasia herself.

For that reason, Anastasia had already forgiven the incident during lunch.

She understood how much courage it took for someone like Hoyeon to approach a stranger and ask a question.

Deep down, Anastasia even found herself quietly rooting for her.

However, her followers were far less forgiving. The harm they'd endured was, in their eyes, too severe to overlook—even considering Hoyeon's status.

From the moment she first set foot on the continent, Hoyeon had ignored all protocols and bypassed borders, heading straight to the academy.

That alone was problematic. On top of that, some individuals had sustained significant injuries while trying to stop her.

There were no casualties, thankfully. If someone had died, a declaration of war wouldn't have been out of the question.

The Baek Empire, known simply as a source of fine silk and spices, could transform into a heinous empire of malice within weeks.

Her followers seized upon the incident at lunch, where Hoyeon appeared to threaten Anastasia.

They were eager to paint Anastasia as a hero standing against the arrogant invaders from the East.

After much effort, Anastasia had managed to scale back her role, avoiding being the empire's avenger and settling for the position of an adviser offering Hoyeon a word of caution. Even so, the situation weighed heavily on her.

"…What should I do, then?"

They demanded that Anastasia not appear weak, regardless of how impolite she might seem, and that she extract an apology from Hoyeon.

Their demands were enough to leave her at a loss.

After all, who would respond favorably to a high-handed demand for an apology? Even Anastasia, socially inept as she was, could recognize that.

The matter of how they'd found out where Hoyeon's room was assigned wasn't a concern. Her followers had a history of presenting inexplicably gathered information, so Anastasia accepted it as routine.

Lost in thought over what to say, Anastasia arrived on the floor where Hoyeon's room was located—only to witness an unexpected scene.

She saw Hoyeon emerge from her own room and casually enter another.

Has she made a friend? Doubt crept into Anastasia's mind. She had thought Hoyeon was like her, but perhaps that was her own delusion.

It might have seemed trivial to others, but to Anastasia, it was a significant issue.

However, the sight of Hoyeon leaving that room with a man left Anastasia's thoughts utterly blank.

Her knowledge of reproductive health wasn't entirely lacking—she knew that holding hands didn't result in a baby.

If that were true, she would've had a sibling the moment her father held her mother's hand.

But she did know one thing about how children were conceived: a man and a woman entering the same room.

She'd learned this when, as a child, she'd woken up in the early hours and wandered the manor, only to see her father enter her mother's room. Not long after, she'd gained a younger sibling.

Of course, her father had emerged the next day looking rather disheveled.

By comparison, Hoyeon and the man had spent only a few minutes together and looked perfectly composed. Still, Anastasia couldn't be certain.

Lacking more specific knowledge about how babies were made, Anastasia arrived at a singular conclusion:

Did Hoyeon now carry that man's child?

Her mind spiraled into chaos. She'd entirely forgotten why she was even here, her heart pounding as she clutched her chest and observed them from afar.

The seemingly eternal moment shattered the instant Hoyeon looked in her direction.

Like someone caught witnessing the forbidden, Anastasia bolted from the dormitory, her face flushed red.

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Anya was there just a moment ago, but now she was gone.

I didn't know how long she'd been standing there or why she'd run off the moment I looked at her. Maybe she was curious about me as a beastkin?

But if she was curious, why run away? It didn't make sense.

Was it one of those it's fascinating, but I don't want it looking at me situations? Like seeing something uncanny?

It stung. It reminded me of middle school when I was caught with otaku merchandise and the girls acted the same way the next day.

"What's wrong?"

Dogeon, apparently oblivious, asked what the problem was.

True to his harem-protagonist nature, he lacked awareness in all the wrong places.

He could practically read minds when it mattered, but when it didn't? Completely clueless. It was infuriating.

"Nothing. Let's just go."

Perhaps sensing my irritation, he quietly led the way. As I followed him, he suddenly asked me:

"…Could I ask what Magi is?"

"You don't know?"

How could the protagonist not know? When I pressed him, he sincerely claimed ignorance.

Was he the kind to fall asleep while reading the novel? There was no reason not to explain it, though.

“Hmm… What is Magi, you ask.”

When I tried to articulate it, the words didn’t come easily.

“…It’s the power that makes the earth tremble, the skies shift, and the seas part.”

“But isn’t mana the same?”

He had a point. Mages could perform similar feats. For someone uninformed, it was an understandable question.

“It’s different. Magi isn’t a power humans can wield. It’s a force governed solely by the gods. Some call it the blood of the stars.”

“The gods, you say…?”

I nearly blurted out the fake gods you worship, but stopped myself.

Was it safe to say something like that? In stories like this, the church was often portrayed as shadowy and corrupt, waiting for the protagonist to slip up so they could declare them a heretic.

On the way to the academy, I’d even seen inquisitors dragging people off for heresy. There was no point in giving them an excuse to target me.

“…It’s not something you need to concern yourself with, so don’t bother.”

It sounded like the kind of dismissive line that annoying green cat from a game would say, but it was the best I could manage.

Dogeon looked visibly deflated, as if disappointed. I glared at him briefly, and he straightened up. Nice try, but I wasn’t about to spill anything more.

“I don’t know how your people managed it, but you’ve twisted Magi into what you call divine power or mana.”

“What do you mean by twisted?”

“It means taking a power meant only for gods and enabling humans—or other beings—to use it.”

I carefully avoided calling their gods fake, instead using vague terms like “other beings.” It wasn’t a lie—elves weren’t human, after all.

“…Isn’t that a good thing?”

“It’s like entrusting a nation’s treasury to fools. They’ll waste it on senseless things. Wouldn’t it be better to leave it in the hands of someone wise and capable?”

Probably. Humans already destroy their environment without magic. Letting them misuse Magi would only hasten disaster.

I’d seen firsthand what happened to areas drained of Magi. Though, in fairness, it wasn’t humans who depleted it—it was my mother, who’d drained an entire leyline in an instant.

I still couldn’t forget the sight of a fortress, which had withstood months of siege, crumbling to white dust in a moment. Not just the walls—the people and animals inside had turned to powder, too. It was hard to believe it was real.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“If that clears things up, let’s keep moving.”

Honestly, I’d glossed over a lot, so I felt a bit guilty. But if Dogeon pressed for details, I’d be in trouble. I tried to end the conversation before he asked more questions.

Fortunately, though he didn’t seem fully satisfied, he resumed walking.

Come to think of it, he’d stopped while I was explaining. Naturally, I’d stopped too.

Was this how social butterflies manipulated people?

I hadn't even noticed him stop—it was that seamless. His knack for dealing with people was no joke.

I used to think mind-control scenarios in fiction were ridiculous, but watching Dogeon made me wonder if they weren't entirely impossible.

At least there weren't any mind-control scenes in the novel. If there had been, this guy would've been downright dangerous.

Actually, he was already pretty dangerous. But at least he didn't mess with people's wills outright.

"We're here."

Snapping out of my thoughts, I realized we'd arrived at the dining hall. A few people were

scattered around, but it was still mostly quiet.

I started browsing the options, trying to decide what to eat, when I remembered what had happened earlier.

Whatever I picked would probably taste terrible. Even if it smelled good, the moment I put it in my mouth, it'd be awful. The thought made me hesitate.

Glancing to the side, I saw Dogeon.

…He's popular, so he must know what's good, right?

Hoping for the best, I called out to him.

"What looks tasty to you?"

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 19

Chapter 19: The End of a Day (5)

When she asked me, “What looks tasty?” I froze.

I had no idea what any of the food here tasted like, so how was I supposed to recommend something? My mind went completely blank.

And typically, when someone asked that question, it was less about seeking advice and more about subtly prompting me to guess the one dish they already had in mind. It was like mind-reading in disguise.

“Cold food is a no. Anything with a minty scent is even worse. This section looks like it’s full of those, so there’s no need to bother with it. Let’s move on.”

“The flavor’s too mild, and I dislike overly sweet things. If it’s something savory, I might consider it.”

“The aroma passes, but anything from the sea is out. Let’s find something else.”

Thankfully, Hoyeon was very specific about her preferences.

No desserts, no seafood, nothing sweet. Preferably salty, with bold flavors.

Once I narrowed down the options, only a few choices remained.

Most of them were dishes laden with bright red oil or exuding strong scents.

As I picked them out, I couldn’t help but wonder, Is she really going to eat this? But as she piled her plate high and licked her lips in anticipation, it seemed I’d chosen well.

Still, her preferences struck me as unusual for a girl. I'd never met anyone —especially a girl—who disliked sweet or cold foods and didn't care for desserts.

Her plate consisted almost entirely of oily, spicy-looking meats and carbohydrates.

I couldn't help but wonder how she stayed in shape eating like that, but I figured she had her own methods.

We didn't exchange much conversation while eating. She seemed entirely focused on her meal, while I was preoccupied organizing my thoughts.

First, about the gods. The deity she mentioned clearly wasn't the goddess revered by the Holy Church. Her description of divine power as "twisted Magi" raised plenty of questions.

Moreover, her evasive answers when I asked about the gods suggested that her beliefs weren't exactly acceptable on this continent.

I wasn't sure how much she knew, but it brought to mind certain aspects of the world's lore:

Demons and Magi.

There was the established idea that demons and their followers used Magi, that divine power suppressed Magi, and that this continent was saturated with divine energy.

Given her constant discomfort, it wasn't unreasonable to suspect Hoyeon might use Magi or, at the very least, be connected to it.

But that felt like too big a leap.

Take Stefania, for example. She didn't use Magi herself but instead turned her followers into Magi users and exploited them. That workaround let her avoid the adverse effects.

Her followers, on the other hand, weren't so lucky.

They described it as feeling like inhaling scalding sand with every breath. Strong or weak, every Magi user ultimately suffered the same fate, wasting away until death.

If Hoyeon were using Magi, she wouldn't be calmly eating right now.

Her small but steady bites, her expression softening slightly as she ate—she genuinely seemed to be enjoying her meal.

It made me wonder how someone like her could come from those parents. One spent their life waging wars of conquest, and the other wasn't even human.

It was hard to believe Hoyeon was their child.

Honestly, if not for her parentage, I might've tried asking her out. I wasn't particularly into beastkin characters, and her absence from the original story left me unsure of how to approach her, but even so…

She was stunning enough that I would've at least asked for her name.

As for her personality? Well, given her upbringing, it wasn't surprising that she had certain quirks. In fact, for someone raised by those two, she was rather well-adjusted.

The way she'd shared her bread without asking questions when she found me in the tree made me wonder if she wasn't kinder than she let on.

And her casual dismissal of people as "fools"? That was probably a product of her upbringing and status.

"What are you staring at? Is there something on my face?"

I must've gotten lost in my thoughts. Somewhere along the way, my mind had shifted from pondering her identity to simply observing her.

"No, nothing at all."

"You're a strange one."

She gave me a look as if she'd seen it all, then went back to eating, her cheeks puffing out slightly with food.

I tried to refocus on organizing my thoughts, but watching her chew made my mind drift again.

Her eating pace slowed over time, and I could tell she'd end up leaving some food on her plate. At this rate, she'd probably only finish about half.

Even though I figured it wouldn't be productive, my thoughts wandered again.

So, about Magi… I didn't have the faintest idea what to make of it. Terms like "the blood of the stars" and "a power only gods can wield" sounded impressive, but they didn't mean much to me.

I couldn't sense anything "twisted" about mana or divine power, and Magi was no different.

The most valuable takeaway was learning that twisted Magi transformed into mana or divine power.

Losing my train of thought made it hard to pick up where I left off. Maybe it was because I'd been jolted awake earlier, or maybe I was just full and getting drowsy.

Still, realizing that Hoyeon wasn't purely a threat was reassuring in itself.

"…I think I took a bit too much."

I knew it. From the start, it looked like too much food.

"Shall we head back, then?"

After poking at her plate a few more times, looking somewhat regretful, she rose from her seat. I followed her back to the dormitory.

We exchanged a few trivial remarks along the way, but nothing significant.

For a fleeting moment, I entertained the idea that everything might end peacefully if I focused on Hoyeon alone. It was just a fantasy, though.

***

Later, with practiced ease, I untied my hair, straightened my clothes, and opened my journal.

Yet, I struggled to find the right words to write.

I knew what I wanted to say, but putting it into coherent sentences felt daunting.

It reminded me of my days as a writer, staring at a blank page only to end up with sentences so incomprehensible that even I couldn't understand them later.

The reason I cared about phrasing was that this journal doubled as letters to my mother.

Still, would she even receive them from here? I didn't doubt her abilities, but I couldn't help feeling skeptical.

I remembered when she'd shown me two books, saying they were "one." At the time, I couldn't understand—two is two, and one is one. How could two books be one?

When I asked her, she'd simply smiled and brushed ink across the cover of one book. The same mark appeared on the other.

That was when I realized what she meant.

Now, far from home and surrounded by twisted Magi, I couldn't be sure if this would still work.

I hadn't written in my journal since arriving on this continent. It had worked during the sea crossing, so I could only hope it would still work now.

…What should I write for the opening line?

Dear Mother? Respected Mother?

I always struggled with this part. My lack of skill as a writer had frustrated me in both lives, but if I spent too much time on this, I'd pull an all-nighter for sure.

Finally, after much deliberation, I managed to write a decent opening.

"To my beloved mother."

Once the first line was down, the rest came more easily. I wrote about what had happened so far: the state of the continent's Magi and leylines, the mishaps during my introduction at the academy, the strange reactions from the students, and the disappointing lunch.

Iris's sudden apology, the shelter, my interactions with Dogeon, and how surprisingly good dinner was.

It felt like a lot had happened, but it all fit on one page.

Upon rereading it, it seemed even more trivial than I'd expected.

The opposite page remained blank. I waited a little longer, hoping for some response, but nothing changed.

…It seemed even my mother had her limits here. Feeling a twinge of sadness, I climbed into bed.

The warmth of the blanket enveloped me quickly, but a corner of my heart still felt cold.

Has sleeping next to someone made me incapable of sleeping alone? That seemed absurd.

Sure, I'd grown used to sleeping with the head of the guards nearby during the journey here, but I wasn't that dependent.

I wasn't a child, after all.

Between my past life and this one, I'd spent over 40 years as an adult. There was no way I couldn't sleep alone.

Why was I treating sleep like it required some solemn resolve? All I had to do was close my eyes and stay still.

Hugging my tail was absolutely not a substitute for having someone nearby.

Absolutely not.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 20

Chapter 20: Club Activities (1)

I'd never fully understood the saying "feeling a chill on your side."

In my previous life, I'd never had anyone sleep beside me, and in this life as Hoyeon, I'd never spent a moment without someone nearby.

If you're thinking, What about during the army or school trips? Didn't you sleep alongside others then?—no, that didn't count.

Actually, those were worse than sleeping alone.

The light snorers were manageable, but then there were the blanket thieves, the restless mutterers, and the self-proclaimed storytellers who couldn't shut up, no matter how absurd their tales.

Worst of all were the ones who ate noisily at night without any regard for others trying to sleep.

…But I digress. Let's get back to the point.

Now, I think I understood the saying.

The early morning air, which should have felt crisp and refreshing, carried a damp, unpleasant chill. The warmth of my blanket, once comforting, felt stifling and oppressive. My side wasn't physically cold, but there was a lingering sense of emptiness that refused to go away.

My tail, too thin to embrace properly, only emphasized the loneliness of having no one beside me. Not to mention the fur sticking uncomfortably to my skin.

Looking out the window, the sky was the pale blue of dawn. It was too late to go back to sleep but too early to start the day.

What should I do? My gaze fell on the open journal on my desk. It felt foolish, almost pathetic, to cling to hope, but I flipped on the light anyway, wondering if anything had changed.

And there, in my mother's unmistakable handwriting, were new words.

I was stunned that it worked even here. A wave of emotion hit me, my nose tingling slightly.

It shouldn't have been this moving—this was a routine thing. Yet the sense of relief it brought was overwhelming.

***

"I was late responding because I've been managing state affairs in your father's stead while he's on the battlefield. I'm sorry if you were waiting."

No, Mother, there's nothing for you to apologize for. I'm just grateful you even responded.

"I saw everything you wrote. For now, I'll keep this from your father. You know how he is about anything involving you—if I told him, he'd march the entire army straight to where you are."

As guilty as I felt about keeping this from Father, I couldn't help but feel relieved. That was exactly the kind of thing he would do.

The worried expression he'd worn when I told him I wanted to attend the academy flashed in my mind, making me chuckle.

If he ever met Dogeon, he'd probably demand to know why some "mangy stray bone" was daring to lay a hand on his daughter, all while unsheathing his sword.

"That aside, I'm reassured. I still vividly remember you proclaiming that no man would ever be allowed near you except for your father and the head of the guards. It seems you're not as disinterested as you claimed. This Dogeon boy… I'll respect your choice, but do not cross the line. I'm not ready to be a grandmother just yet."

That… I can't exactly say it's because Dogeon's the protagonist. And despite writing in my journal that there was nothing between us, Mother clearly thought otherwise.

Already imagining grandchildren? I felt dizzy at the thought, unsure of where to even start explaining. Truly, there was nothing between us.

I mean, sharing bread with a hungry person or asking for directions when you're lost doesn't mean anything!

…Okay, going into his room to wake him and then sharing a meal might seem questionable. But friends do that, don't they?

Wait, are we even friends?

"…Ugh."

I scribbled down that there was nothing between us. At least I could be certain about that.

I didn't even think of him as a man; I just wanted to maintain a cordial relationship with him and observe from nearby.

After all, my reason for coming to the academy was to see what he would do and how he'd interact with the heroines.

Dogeon and I are just friends.

Even though I knew Mother wouldn't change her mind, writing it felt like reassuring myself.

We're just friends.

…Whatever he thought was a different story.

"As for your social life, take your time. As a transfer student on your first day, it's natural for others to feel awkward around you. Trying too hard to get close to them might only push them away. Focus on blending in naturally."

Taking my time? If I did that, I'd end up with no friends by the end of the term. How was I supposed to "take it slow"?

This advice from Mother made no sense to me.

And besides, most of these kids had probably been close-knit since they were little. How was I supposed to naturally fit into such tightly bonded groups?

Should I invite them for tea like Stefania did? But that didn't seem like the right approach.

Maybe Mother wanted me to figure it out on my own.

I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed, but I reminded myself to be grateful she'd responded at all.

"As for Magi, I can't offer you a direct solution right now. However, if you're feeling particularly stifled, take a little from the locker of the boy in the room next to yours. It won't be a permanent fix, but it should help ease the discomfort."

How did she even know about that? And isn't that… stealing? Plus, don't lockers usually have locks or something?

Still, if Mother said so, I decided not to doubt her. Questioning the words of a goddess would be blasphemous, after all.

After closing the journal, I resolved to do as Mother suggested. I felt a bit guilty about rummaging through Dogeon's locker, but I rationalized it as payment for the bread I gave him.

Of course, trading bread for his belongings seemed like a shamelessly one-sided deal.

If the item looked too valuable, I'd leave it alone. But since Mother mentioned taking just a small amount, it was probably something insignificant, like bread or clay.

I threw on some pajamas—it was too chilly to go out in just my underwear, and I didn't have the taste for that anyway—and made my way to the lockers.

Worry crept in about alarms or magical safeguards, but it turned out to be needless. The locker opened silently, revealing a soft glow of pure Magi.

The air immediately felt clearer, making it easier to breathe. Still, this was theft, so I resolved to take only a small amount.

But how was I supposed to "take" something like this? The Magi resembled a green bowling ball, smooth and unyielding.

"…Have faith and do not doubt," I muttered to myself.

Closing my eyes, I reached out to the green sphere. I didn't overthink it, trusting in Mother's words.

Surprisingly, my hand sank into the ball as if it were soft clay. When I opened my eyes, a small green marble sat in my palm. The bowling ball seemed slightly smaller now.

While its energy was a fraction of the original, it was enough to make breathing significantly easier.

I had no idea how Dogeon had acquired such a thing—or how Mother knew about it—but it seemed best not to dwell on it.

Hurrying back to my room, I closed the locker and returned to my bed, hoping I hadn't been seen. If there were magical surveillance or something, wouldn't this be grounds for punishment?

Even though I trusted Mother, stealing still left a sour taste in my mouth. What's done is done, though, and dwelling on it wouldn't help.

The Magi marble felt strange. It wasn't nauseating like before, but it wasn't exactly comfortable either. It was like enduring a humid summer with a single old fan. Better than nothing, but it made you yearn for air conditioning.

I decided to sleep.

Though I hadn't planned on it, raiding Dogeon's locker had left me drained.

I was confident nothing would go wrong, but I couldn't shake the lingering fear: what if Dogeon noticed? What if I ruined something important to him?

Burying myself under the covers, I felt the difference immediately. Breathing was much easier now.

I'd sleep—just a little.

***

The next day, just before class began, Hoyeon walked into the classroom.

She seemed to be in a much better mood than yesterday. Though she still looked slightly annoyed, her demeanor had shifted from "talk to me and I'll kill you" to "don't talk to me."

When I tried to greet her, she blatantly ignored me.

I racked my brain for a reason but couldn't come up with anything, so I decided to leave her alone.

After all, today was more important than her mood.

Today, we'd be deciding on something central to academy life.

Clubs.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 21

Chapter 21: Club Activities (2)

If I were to follow the original story, Exipri should join the Baking Club.

However, considering how easy it was to build affection with her, joining a different club seemed like a better choice.

After all, Exipri was the kind of character who would happily follow anyone just for giving her candy. Leaving her alone was dangerous, as she easily trusted people and loved sweets.

That was why she ended up joining the Baking Club, which was full of delicious treats.

Honestly, it felt like she could be won over by simply giving her a single piece of candy every day. Although I felt like a bad person for thinking that, there wasn't much I could do about it.

Now, the remaining candidates were the Magic Research Club or the Swordsmanship Club…

The Swordsmanship Club, where Anastasia was, seemed like the best option.

As for the Theology Club, its theme was so specific that most of its members were deeply religious, making it difficult to build relationships there.

To be precise, while building relationships was possible, it wouldn't be much help in winning anyone over.

I considered joining the Theology Club because of Gloria, but I decided against it.

Once Stefania got fully involved, I'd naturally have opportunities to connect with Gloria, so it was unnecessary to go out of my way for that.

As for magic, I already had Georg as an outstanding mentor, so there wasn't much point in learning more. Besides, I had no intention of stepping into a dreary, all-male group.

There were a few other clubs where heroines were present, but most required special conditions.

Therefore, the Swordsmanship Club, which didn't have such prerequisites, seemed like the best choice.

For instance, Camilla was in a social club almost exclusively for girls, and Cecilia was in the Spirit Research Club, which required members to communicate with spirits.

Alternatively, there were characters like Iris, whose club affiliations were never even mentioned.

As I mulled over my options, I started wondering what kind of club Hoyeon might choose.

If possible, I wanted to join the same club to look after her. But if I paid her too much attention, I'd only get tied down unnecessarily.

Thinking this far, I felt a bit lost about the future. It was exhausting how one new element in my life could make things so complicated.

When I glanced at the seat next to me, I saw Hoyeon still pointedly ignoring me. Even when scanning the classroom, she stubbornly avoided looking in my direction.

I wondered what was wrong this time but quickly dismissed it. Though we'd only known each other for a day, she had already shown a tendency to swing between extremes. I figured this was just another extension of that.

Though I didn't have to ask, I was curious. Even if she ignored me, I decided to bring it up.

At the very least, I wanted to know what club she was interested in.

“Have you thought about which club you’d like to join?”

“…A club?”

She looked slightly startled, perhaps because she was lost in thought, or maybe it was because I was speaking to her.

Her expression didn’t change, but her ears perked up slightly. That alone made her reaction seem noticeable.

More importantly, her tone suggested she hadn’t heard about this before.

“Yes. Today is the day to choose a club. Didn’t you know?”

“…I didn’t.”

Was she uninterested, or just unaware? Probably both. After a brief silence, as though pondering, she replied.

“A club… I see. No, I haven’t given it any thought.”

I almost suggested the Swordsmanship Club, but stopped myself. We weren’t close enough for me to recommend it outright, and it would have been too obvious. Perhaps a more indirect approach would work.

“Are you, by any chance, interested in swordsmanship?”

I asked subtly but made my intentions clear enough for her to notice.

While I didn’t say it outright, my question carried the suggestion that she join the Swordsmanship Club.

Her reaction, however, was underwhelming.

“Swordsmanship? I learned a bit from my father when I was younger. But it was more for fun than anything serious. I’m not even good enough to show others. Why do you ask?”

Whether she grasped my intentions or not, she didn't seem particularly pleased. Her expression remained unchanged, making it hard to read her thoughts.

Still, the fact that she mentioned having practiced a little, only to downplay it as "just for fun," suggested she wasn't particularly interested.

"You seemed undecided, so I thought I'd recommend something if you had any interest."

"…I'll consider it. Thanks for the thought."

At least she didn't say, Who are you to tell me what to do? It seemed I hadn't upset her, but getting her to join the Swordsmanship Club still felt like a failure.

Hoyeon stared ahead again, clearly uninterested in continuing the conversation. Since it was obvious she wanted me to stop talking, I decided not to push it further.

Unexpectedly, she had a polite side that didn't suit her position.

As I mused over such trivial thoughts, Dorothy entered through the front door.

After a brief greeting, she delivered the announcement.

"Hello, everyone! As you all know, today is the day to pick your clubs. While it's not mandatory, joining a club could be helpful after you graduate.

Plus, Amaurus Academy's clubs are as prestigious as its regular classes. So if you're interested, I encourage you to join!"

The rest of her announcement could be summarized as follows: all periods from first to sixth would feature club representatives giving presentations instead of regular classes; midterms were in a month, so start studying early; and there was a vote ongoing in the student council hall to decide the destination for the school trip, so cast your precious vote.

After finishing her announcements, Dorothy quickly left the classroom.

Shortly after, the bell rang for first period, and the club ambassadors entered to begin their presentations.

“The Swordsmanship Club’s room is in Gymnasium 1. If you’re interested, please visit after school.”

With the final bell signaling the end of sixth period, the Swordsmanship Club’s presentation concluded as well.

After hearing all the presentations, nothing stood out to me. The Magic Research Club’s demonstration briefly caught my attention, but it involved mana, which I found utterly unpleasant.

Other clubs, like the Spirit Research Club or social clubs, weren’t particularly appealing either.

When the Spirit Research Club’s ambassador summoned a spirit, I did briefly sense a divine presence that woke me from my stupor.

But it was so faint and twisted that I doubted myself. When I sent a message just in case, I got no response, which made me think it was either my imagination or something made from a fragment or remains of a god.

Back home, gods did occasionally die, though it was rare.

They might face punishment from the Mother for breaking too many of her laws or lose in battles where their divinity was at stake, resulting in absorption by the victor.

However, I’d never seen something like that spirit, which faintly retained divinity, being created.

Perhaps it had something to do with the divine energy or mana unique to this continent. The distortion felt similar.

In any case, that was that.

I still hadn’t decided which club to join. Since my goal in coming to the academy was to observe the protagonist, I thought about simply following wherever Dogeon went.

“Have you chosen a club yet?”

When I asked Dogeon, he hesitated briefly before replying.

“Ah… yes. I decided on the Swordsmanship Club.”

A fantasy protagonist being a swordsman—how predictable. While boring, I couldn’t deny that swords were undeniably cool. There was something about them that stirred a man’s heart.

“Then I suppose I’ll join the Swordsmanship Club as well.”

“Really?”

He looked at me with a delighted expression, which annoyed me slightly. It felt like I was moving according to his plans, but I still intended to join the Swordsmanship Club.

“You talk too much.”

I shot back, irritated. Seeing him shrink back like a scolded puppy improved my mood slightly.

“Hoyeon, are you in a good mood today? Your expression seems a bit relaxed.”

But his next words sent a chill down my spine. I’d felt somewhat at ease with the green ping-pong ball in my skirt pocket, but had he noticed it?

What should I do? I’d already felt guilty and avoided looking at him all morning. That look in his eyes only made me feel worse.

“…Just guide me to the gym where the Swordsmanship Club is.”

Feeling cornered, I proposed going to the clubroom to escape the situation.

Surprisingly, he seemed to be the type who would do anything if asked. Based on yesterday and now, that seemed plausible.

As we walked, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Glancing around, I spotted a silver-haired girl and a blond boy following us.

It was Anastasia and Goldsun.

They'd been glancing over since the first period. Had I caught Goldsun's attention? A sense of unease crept in.

Considering his tendency to bother the nun, he seemed like the type to chase skirts. There was no other way to explain his gaze.

When we arrived, I realized why they were following us.

"Hello! Are you here because you're interested in the Swordsmanship Club too?"

Apparently, they wanted to join the Swordsmanship Club as well.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 22

Chapter 22: Club Activities (3)

Anastasia had already planned to join the Swordsmanship Club, regardless of the others.

Considering she had been closer to a sword than anyone else except her parents since childhood, it was only natural.

Yet, she couldn't quite explain why she tried to avoid Han Dogeon and Hoyeon on the way to the gymnasium. Simply looking at them filled her with a strange sense of guilt.

This feeling stemmed from her assumption. After seeing Hoyeon enter Dogeon's room that night, Anastasia had already concluded that the two had a child together.

Even after arriving at Gymnasium 1, her mind wouldn't settle.

It was only after the typical exchange of, "Are you the new members?" "Yes, we are," with someone who appeared to be the club representative, and she finally managed to calm down.

"We have a lot of new members this year! Hmm, I'm Jessica, the vice-leader of the Swordsmanship Club.

Normally, the leader would be the one hosting this welcome event, but they've been pretty busy lately, so they handed it over to me."

Jessica spoke cheerfully, gesturing toward a group of people who seemed to be members of the club.

They stepped forward, carrying large bundles on their backs. From these bundles, they began pulling out wooden training dummies, each scarred

with countless blade marks.

While most of the new members didn't seem to grasp their purpose, Anastasia could guess what was coming. Her swordsmanship instructor had made her do something similar when they first met.

"So, I've decided to do things my way this year! First off, let's take a look at your skills!"

Anastasia's hand unconsciously moved to the hilt of her sword.

The rest of Jessica's words weren't particularly important to her. All she cared about was when her turn would come.

The first spot? No, that would draw too much attention. The second? The third? She weighed her options, wondering which position would attract the least scrutiny.

What she overlooked, however, was that as the daughter of the Northern Grand Duke, any position would inevitably attract attention.

While Anastasia debated internally, a student voiced a skeptical question.

"…Is that really all there is? How can you assess our skills just by hitting those wooden dummies?"

"Good question, whoever you are!" Jessica replied with a laugh. "You're right, this won't give us a perfect measure of your abilities. It's more to get a general sense of your level—your stance, your targeting, the strength behind your strikes… that sort of thing. I've got a decent eye for swordsmanship. While I'm not as sharp as the leader, I can usually tell what level someone's at."

"Then why bother dividing us by skill levels?"

Jessica chuckled. "Because you can't give beginner lessons to someone at an expert level, can you?"

The student who raised the issue seemed satisfied with her answer. Jessica scanned the group, searching for her first participant.

Her gaze landed on someone unusual—a girl with black strands woven into her white hair, and animal-like ears that stood out starkly.

This was Hoyeon, the "unwelcome guest from the East" that circulated in whispers among the aristocracy. Jessica had heard rumors of her coming to the academy but didn't expect her to join the Swordsmanship Club.

Driven purely by curiosity, Jessica called her out. Despite being stationed in the provinces, Jessica had heard the infamous tale: the girl guarded by warriors who subdued an entire knightly order and demanded safe passage in exchange for their ransom. Jessica couldn't help but wonder—what level of skill did someone under the protection of such warriors possess?

Though another student with silver hair and a hand resting on her sword caught Jessica's eye, her curiosity about Hoyeon outweighed it.

"How about you, Miss Tiger Beastkin over there? Would you like to go first?"

Why me?

Jessica's choice felt like an act of betrayal. Out of all the people here, why had she chosen me over Anastasia, who was practically itching to volunteer?

The mere thought of standing in front of everyone made my stomach churn. My father had already said I lacked any talent for swordsmanship, and now I had to prove it in public?

During PE class, at least I could go last. This time, I was first.

My tail swished nervously, betraying my anxiety.

I'd always thought public humiliation came in the form of mockery and laughter. I never imagined it would take the form of this.

Though my feet felt like they were glued to the floor, everyone's stares left me no choice but to move.

"Nervous about being the first?" Jessica asked.

Wouldn't anyone be? Do you think I'd be smiling right now?

"That would be a lie," I replied bluntly.

"Don't worry! No one's going to judge you for doing badly. Just give it a few swings and see how it feels. Relax!"

Yeah, great advice. That just makes it worse. Pressure like that never helped anyone relax.

"…Fine," I sighed.

"Don't be so tense! Just give it a shot!"

As I steadied my breath, I realized something important: I didn't have a sword.

How would this look to others? Showing up to join the Swordsmanship Club without a sword?

Maybe this was my chance to back out. After all, you can't swing a sword if you don't have one, right?

"I don't have a sword."

But my hopes were dashed.

"Really? Then here, borrow mine! It might not feel the same as what you're used to, so swing it around a bit and tell me if it's uncomfortable. If it doesn't suit you, we'll find something else!"

Her relentless cheerfulness left me mortified. The fact that someone cared so much about my swordsmanship—or rather, cared enough to not let me escape—was humiliating.

I couldn’t help but recall a middle school music assessment when I forgot my recorder, and the teacher made a classmate lend me theirs.

The look on their face screamed how much they hated it, and I felt terrible borrowing it. In the end, I played terribly and ruined my score, which only made the whole experience worse.

The borrowed sword felt heavier than expected, though that might have been psychological.

Jessica was probably skilled in mana breathing or something, so this weight didn’t bother her. For me, though, it felt unbearable.

I hadn’t touched a sword in over five years, let alone wielded a real one. Running away seemed impossible now that I’d accepted the sword.

They say once you draw a sword, you have to cut something.

Remembering that phrase helped steel my resolve. Rather than flee, I decided to face this head-on.

My father used to cut down trees effortlessly with his sword when I was young. Even if I lacked talent, surely I could at least leave a mark on a wooden dummy as his daughter.

The dummy was already covered in scars, so it didn’t seem particularly reinforced. Swinging the borrowed sword experimentally, I found it manageable, albeit heavy. Maybe starting with a real blade wasn’t so bad after all.

Gripping the hilt firmly, I adjusted my stance. A baseless confidence welled up inside me. Surely, I could manage a single strike. Iron should at least dent wood, right?

Summoning the image of my father’s flawless trajectory, I swung.

“Haaah!”

It was hopeless.

To my dismay—or perhaps relief—the dummy bore only a shallow scratch.

My father wasn't this weak. My father wasn't this slow. If he were here instead of me, that dummy would have been sliced into seventeen pieces in an instant.

From the first swing, everything felt wrong. I hadn't even dropped the sword, yet my confidence plummeted.

Jessica's gaze, once filled with curiosity, now seemed like she was observing something odd.

"…Have you trained in swordsmanship before?" she asked.

It sounded polite, but I couldn't help hearing, "You're awful at this."

"My father taught me a little when I was younger," I admitted, hating myself for dragging his name into this.

Jessica didn't press further, much to my relief. If she had made any remarks about my father's teaching, I might have died of embarrassment.

"Alright, then. Next! You there, silver-haired girl playing with her sword, your turn."

As I trudged back to my seat, I felt everyone's stares. It was as if they were scrutinizing some strange object, their gazes stabbing into me like nails.

Why was everything falling apart on the first day? Even Dogeon's awkward attempt to console me was grating.

"That was amazing! Such a smooth trajectory and quick strikes. Few students could match that!"

"It was terrible. My speed and technique were a mess. Stop exaggerating."

His forced flattery felt more like mockery.

Dogeon looked uneasy, but I didn't care. I just wanted to sit and watch the others swing their swords.

Thankfully, Anastasia stepped up next, ready to take her turn. I decided to focus on her instead.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 23

Chapter 23: Club Activities (4)

As expected of the Northern Grand Duke's daughter, Anastasia's sword cleanly split the wooden dummy in half.

But honestly, I couldn't help but admire her sword. When sheathed, it looked ordinary, but the moment it was drawn, it expanded like something out of a fantasy novel—thicker, larger, and undeniably captivating.

Even though she was a woman, the sword itself carried a romantic appeal that resonated with the masculine heart.

Moreover, as soon as she prepared to strike, frost formed along the massive blade, and icy shards scattered along its trajectory. It was breathtaking.

Jessica, who had only shown curiosity when I wielded the sword, now gazed at Anastasia with something akin to reverence.

"Wow, amazing! I can't believe it! I didn't expect you'd actually split it in half! And that unusual sword—and your breathing technique! Are you from the North?"

"…Yes. Um, was I not supposed to break that wooden dummy?"

As someone who preferred solitude, I could tell she was uncomfortable.

Outsiders like us wither under the spotlight of attention. Jessica, clearly an extrovert, seemed utterly oblivious to Anastasia's predicament.

"No, not at all! In fact, it's designed to see if anyone can break it! It may look shabby, but it's made of incredibly tough wood. Even our leader can only split it, and you're a first-year who pulled it off so effortlessly!"

"…You're too kind."

“Wait a minute… your hair, the runes on your sword, and the fact that you’re from the North… Could it be? Are you the famed ‘Icebreaker Anastasia’? The one who hunted monsters at just nine years old?!”

As murmurs spread through the crowd, Anastasia’s head drooped, her lips pressed tightly shut, as if silently begging for this to end.

No one had ever recognized me like that before, but I imagined I’d feel the same—completely mortified. The idea of someone shouting a weird nickname and recounting my childhood deeds in front of others was enough to make me respect Anastasia’s composure.

Meanwhile, Goldsun’s persistent stare hadn’t let up. At this point, it was seriously unnerving.

“…I… I am Anastasia, but those stories about hunting monsters are exaggerated rumors.”

“Haha, my bad! I got a little carried away. Now then, the next person… Wait, I forgot to divide the groups!”

Jessica scratched her head sheepishly, and to my dismay, she looked directly at me.

What now? She’d already humiliated me by calling me out first. Jessica was already an enemy in my mind, so whatever she had in store couldn’t be good.

“Uh, Anastasia, right?”

“…Yes.”

“Could you escort the first girl over there to stand behind the blue-haired girl?”

“…Pardon?”

“Or is that too much to ask? Am I being unreasonable?”

Jessica had a way of making requests sound impossible to refuse, much like those overly cheerful colleagues back at the office. It brought back memories of unreasonable workloads that I somehow managed to handle.

Perhaps I should've stood my ground back then. Not that it mattered now—I couldn't even remember what I used to do for a living.

This situation felt too familiar. Jessica even looked a bit like one of those coworkers.

"Oh, no! It's not unreasonable, but, uh…"

Anastasia glanced nervously between Jessica and me, her confusion and hesitation evident. She clearly didn't want to do it but couldn't figure out how to refuse politely.

"It's not too much, is it?"

"…N-no."

"Great! Thanks. Next up—blond boy over there!"

And with that, Anastasia had no choice but to comply. She hesitated for a moment before reluctantly heading toward me.

For a noble of her stature, surely she could've just said no. Then again, I wasn't exactly in a position to criticize—I was a princess from a distant continent who avoided attention out of sheer self-preservation.

Maybe it was simply harder for introverts like us to refuse.

Wanting to help ease her discomfort, I took the initiative to approach her.

"Fancy meeting you again."

"…Yes, it seems so."

"Let's go, then."

There wasn't much need to push through the crowd. While it wasn't overly dense, people instinctively moved aside as we approached. Probably out of fear of Anastasia's status—or maybe they just didn't want to get near me.

I couldn't help but worry that my presence might tarnish her reputation. Should I have kept a bit more distance?

"Um… may I ask something?"

Her voice startled me out of my thoughts. Despite my surprise, I resolved to answer sincerely.

"What is it? Speak freely."

"What… Do you think of family?"

Family? Where had that come from?

The question caught me off guard, but I'd already decided to answer truthfully. After some thought, I replied.

"Family is everything."

"Everything…"

"Why do you ask?"

What could have prompted such a question? While it wasn't inappropriate, it felt oddly out of place.

"Well… you said your father taught you swordsmanship…"

Ah, so that was it. She must've been wondering how my father could've taught me so poorly. It was a fair question, though the implication stung a little.

"It's not my father's fault. I simply lack the skill to follow in his footsteps. If it were anyone else, they wouldn't be so bad."

She seemed to realize she might've gone too far and refrained from pressing further.

An awkward silence hung between us as we reached our destination.

After Hoyeon and Anastasia's turns, nothing particularly surprising happened.

Several students managed to leave noticeable marks or scratches on the dummies, but their performances were all within expected bounds.

Those who understood mana breathing techniques could at least scratch the surface. Without mana breathing, even the best swords couldn't leave a dent.

Jessica's mind, however, was preoccupied with what she'd seen from Hoyeon.

Her speed, her trajectory, the strength she displayed despite not using mana breathing—all were remarkable. But what stood out most was the intent behind her strikes.

While swordsmanship ultimately existed to harm, Jessica felt Hoyeon's moves were focused entirely on efficient killing.

She targeted only the most vulnerable spots—places where even a graze could be fatal. Her style, fleeting as it was, seemed more befitting of a soldier or assassin than a princess.

What kind of father would teach his child such techniques?

Jessica pondered the question, but no clear answer emerged. Lost in thought, she continued dividing the groups until only one student remained.

A young man with black hair and black eyes—handsome, yet lacking any striking features.

Though Jessica hadn't called him, Dogeon stepped forward, recognizing it was his turn.

“You’re the last one. It looks like you don’t have a sword. Want to borrow one?”

Jessica offered her sword, but Dogeon declined.

Observing the process closely, Dogeon had deduced the sorting criteria.

The blue-haired girl’s group was the advanced class, the brown-haired girl’s group the intermediate, and the red-haired boy’s group the beginner.

Under normal circumstances, he would’ve swung honestly and accepted his placement. But with Hoyeon and Anastasia both in the advanced group, Dogeon had no choice. To protect Hoyeon from any misfortune and maintain his connection with Anastasia, he needed to be in the same group.

This meant leaving a prominent mark on the dummy.

Instead of borrowing a sword, Dogeon picked up a fragment of wood that had broken off one of the dummies.

“No need. This will do.”

Jessica looked at him in confusion as Dogeon assumed his stance.

“Enchant.”

Blue mana gathered at the edge of the wooden fragment, growing from the size of a nail to the shape of a full blade.

“Hah!”

With a sharp cry, Dogeon swung. The mana blade left a glowing blue scar on the dummy before dissipating.

“A mage? I didn’t expect to see something this rare! But why would a mage join the Swordsmanship Club?”

The real reasons—monitoring Hoyeon and building ties with Anastasia—weren’t things he could share. Instead, Dogeon crafted an appropriate

response.

“Because the sword is the king of all weapons.”

“You think so too?!”

Jessica’s enthusiasm for swords sparked an animated conversation. Dogeon knew he’d succeeded.

“Haha, sorry, I got a little carried away there. Anyway, with your skill… advanced class!”

Pointing to the blue-haired girl’s group, Jessica confirmed Dogeon’s placement.

Smiling to himself, Dogeon knew his strategy had worked perfectly.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 24

Chapter 24: Club Activities (5)

“Hello, everyone. I’m Skaya, your instructor. Though… it seems none of you need my teaching.”

The girl with the sky-blue hair introduced herself as Skaya.

She exuded the aura of a seasoned expert, yet after glancing around at us, she claimed she had nothing to teach. It was oddly anticlimactic.

“Some of you have completely destroyed the training dummies, and others have crafted swords with magic… Honestly, I feel like I should be the one learning here.”

She fidgeted with her scabbard awkwardly before her expression brightened with an idea.

“In that case, how about you all interact with one another? Given your talents, you might learn more by sharing your swordsmanship techniques than from me teaching you.”

I had braced myself for endless practice swings like in a typical swordsmanship class, but instead, we were expected to mingle. The thought alone made me sigh in exhaustion.

…The other students flinching around me wasn’t my fault, I swear.

“Since no one seems to object, we’ll proceed like this moving forward unless something changes. If you need help, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Compared to Jessica, Skaya was much easier to approach—both in appearance and demeanor. But there was no way I was going to be the lone dissenter here.

The other students had already started forming groups naturally.

I hadn't thought much when walking over with Anastasia earlier, but seeing clearly skilled students line up behind me now made me wonder if this was all some elaborate prank.

They were undoubtedly experts, which made me question if I truly belonged here.

Dogeon had praised me enthusiastically, but it felt more like flattery than anything sincere. Even if he were right, I couldn't shake my dissatisfaction.

"Anastasia! You're not only beautiful but also incredibly strong! Ah, I'm so envious!"

"Anastasia, you're amazing! The rumors about you tearing through monsters must be true!"

"Anastasia, are those runes engraved on your sword?"

—Anastasia this, Anastasia that.

The busiest spot in the room was, predictably, around her.

Roughly a third of the questions were related to swordsmanship, but the rest were blatantly attempts to curry favor.

Sorry, Anastasia. I'd love to help, but people terrify me. Good luck out there.

Surrounded by people, she seemed unsure of how to respond. While part of me envied her, she also looked somewhat pitiable.

Meanwhile, Dogeon was here in the same advanced group, hovering near Anastasia like the harem protagonist he was.

So you're just like Goldsun, huh? Another guy obsessed with girls.

When he created a sword out of magic earlier, he'd seemed cool. But now? Not so much. He just looked like a guy trying to hit on someone.

As a former man myself, I could understand his behavior—but that didn't mean I enjoyed watching it.

Just like I didn't enjoy this boy suddenly approaching me.

"Hello, I'm Kaya. I was wondering if you could teach me the swordsmanship you demonstrated earlier. Would that be alright?"

He introduced himself and immediately asked me to teach him swordsmanship. How could I not be suspicious?

He didn't even look convincing, not like Dogeon, and his attempt to cozy up to me was almost pitiful.

I didn't want to be harsh, but I really wished he'd disappear.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to decline. I'm not skilled enough to teach anyone, and frankly, what I displayed wasn't proper swordsmanship."

"Wasn't it proper? It felt like I was watching the culmination of a lifetime's swordsmanship."

What nonsense was this? There was no way he genuinely believed that. He was just trying to flatter me before making his next move.

"Are you pretending to know everything after watching a few swings?"

"…Apologies. That was presumptuous of me."

"If you understand, then leave. I won't say it twice."

Watching him slink away like a chastised puppy finally put me at ease. My father always said that all men were beasts and should be kept at a distance.

Dogeon might've been an exception. After all, I'd come to this academy specifically to observe him. There was something about him that disarmed

people’s defenses.

Sure, he was circling Anastasia like a hyena now, but whenever he came near me, he transformed into a docile puppy. He didn’t feel nearly as threatening as someone like Goldsun.

Speaking of Goldsun, he was still staring at me. He wasn’t even trying to hide it.

I couldn’t understand why he was so fixated on me. Whatever he wanted, it wasn’t going to happen.

“Family, huh? I haven’t given it much thought. But why do you ask, Lady Anastasia?”

I heard Dogeon’s voice and realized he was talking about family again.

What was going on? Was Anastasia really the type to ask about something like that? She might’ve lacked some common sense, but she’d never struck me as eccentric.

Why had she brought up family—not just to me, but to Dogeon as well?

Still, Anastasia was far better company than those extroverts who lacked any consideration for people like me. Everyone has their quirks. The difference is whether they’re hidden or visible. Anastasia simply chose to show hers.

“…You need to value family more.”

“…Pardon?”

Dogeon looked baffled, but Anastasia had already moved on, speaking to someone else.

When she passed by me, I noticed the confusion still lingering on her face.

“Ah, Hoyeon.”

“Things aren’t going well for you, are they?”

Though I’d intended to tease him slightly, Dogeon had tried to comfort me earlier, so I decided to return the favor.

“…Did something upset you?”

“No, not at all. I just thought, ‘Oh, he’s just another typical guy after all.’”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for? I already said it’s fine.”

***

Something had felt off since Anastasia started acting slightly hostile toward me. And then came the talk about family.

It wasn’t in her nature. Had something happened that I wasn’t aware of?

Could it be because of Hoyeon?

No, that was too far-fetched. She and Hoyeon had only met yesterday, and nothing significant had occurred.

So, what could it be?

I didn’t have time to dwell on it as Hoyeon approached.

“Ah, Hoyeon.”

However, her next words made my headache worse.

“Things aren’t going well for you, are they?”

Her expression wasn’t one of comfort but mockery. She looked like she was enjoying my struggles.

“…Did something upset you?”

I had no clue what was behind her behavior, so I asked, hoping she'd explain.

"No, not at all. I just realized you're a typical man, after all."

She's jealous that I spoke to someone else.

I'd encountered women like this a few times before, and I knew how exhausting it could get if I didn't appease her now.

"I'm sorry."

Normally, I'd have just cut ties, but with Hoyeon, that wasn't an option. So, I decided to play along.

"What are you apologizing for? I said it's fine."

She clearly wasn't fine. And the idea of dodging her while trying to interact with the other heroines for the next few days felt overwhelming.

Leaving her alone wasn't an option, but keeping her nearby might hinder building connections with the others.

Exhausting, but I'll just have to work harder.

First, I needed to calm her down.

"No, really. I'm sorry."

That seemed to make things worse.

"Don't make me repeat myself."

She had no intention of letting this slide. It felt excessive for such a minor mistake, but at least I'd learned something valuable.

"Understood."

Anastasia's earlier reaction and Hoyeon's warning had both hit their mark. I couldn't build any real rapport with Anastasia, but at least Hoyeon wasn't in serious trouble.

The first club session ended without much to show for it. As we walked back to the dorm, Hoyeon spoke up.

"…I let it slide yesterday, but you're still following me today."

Because if I leave you alone, this continent could be in danger. But I didn't say that aloud.

"I don't have anyone else to walk with."

That was true enough. I knew no one else, and it was only the second day at the academy.

"No friends? You?"

She sounded genuinely incredulous, as if the idea of me being friendless was absurd.

It was almost insulting, considering how quickly people dismissed me the moment I tried to approach them.

"Other than you, there's no one I could call a friend. Can I consider you one?"

I wasn't looking to argue, so I kept my tone soft. Plus, framing it this way gave me an excuse to keep following her.

"Me… a friend?"

She repeated the word like a broken record, as if trying to process it. Had I said something wrong again? Before I could

overthink it, she muttered:

"If we're… friends, then… Can I speak casually?"

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 25

Chapter 25: Friends

“Pardon?”

Even though I’d heard her perfectly, I couldn’t help but ask again, dumbfounded.

Just a moment ago, she had exuded regal authority. Now, she seemed like an entirely different person. Was she secretly two-faced? Did her personality just… change on a whim?

Otherwise, how could someone transform like this?

“Um… What I mean is…! Ugh…”

She now resembled a nervous child attempting to make their first friend.

Surely not. There’s no way someone of her status—a princess, no less—could go nineteen years without forming relationships.

Even if she’d entered the academy as soon as she came of age, she’d still have been surrounded by people.

It was unfathomable. The sight before me defied explanation. Unless she was joking—or truly had a split personality.

“…We… were friends, right?”

Her current demeanor was more like a frightened kitten than a tiger.

Her ears drooped, and her tail curled toward her body.

Even someone unfamiliar with animal body language could tell she was radiating unease.

Regardless, this was undeniably an opportunity. I'd been at a loss for how to approach her, and now she was effectively granting me permission.

"Yes, of course we're… friends."

It felt strange to speak casually after consistently using honorifics.

"Really?"

Despite my affirmation, she still asked for confirmation, her voice filled with uncertainty.

"Then… Hoyeon?"

Hearing me call her by name, she flinched slightly. I remembered her hating it last time, claiming it was too familiar. But now, she merely blushed without showing signs of disapproval.

Perhaps she was terrible at expressing herself.

Though I'd thought Anastasia was bad in that regard, Hoyeon might actually surpass her if my hunch was correct.

"Y-yeah?"

"…Have you… never had anyone you could call a friend?"

Her expression froze as though I'd struck a nerve. I began to suspect I'd touched on something sensitive.

Much like how you shouldn't tell someone they're unattractive, perhaps asking this was off-limits.

"…"

After a moment of silence, she gave a small nod.

This… Is this her true self? Perhaps that cold, aloof exterior was merely a mask to hide this part of her.

Assuming this was indeed her true nature, I couldn't help but imagine how difficult it must've been for whoever taught her courtly manners.

"If that upset you, I'm sorry."

"N-no, there's no need to apologize!"

Despite her words, her hurt feelings were obvious. It was like watching someone insist they were fine while visibly struggling.

"No, really, I should've been more considerate."

"Ah, uh… Stop it…"

Why did apologizing feel like committing a crime? I had a strong feeling that pressing further would lead to irreparable damage, so I left it there.

We walked in awkward silence, neither of us meeting the other's gaze. She fiddled with her hair and stared off into the distance, clearly as uncomfortable as I was.

Having declared ourselves friends, it felt wrong to return to the dorms in complete silence.

"Did you have anything you wanted to do?"

I tried to spark some conversation, but she didn't seem inclined to talk.

"…No."

"Then, is there anywhere you want to go?"

"…No."

So we were just heading back to the dorms after all. Occasionally, I caught her glancing at me, but she always turned away when I tried to meet her gaze.

Her sharp rejections left me regretting bringing up the topic of friendship in the first place.

“Are we just heading back to the dorms, then?”

“Yes.”

She was even cuter now than when she played the part of a dignified princess. It made me wonder how someone like her could come from such powerful parents.

Initially, I’d planned to avoid her, not pursue her. But if she kept showing me this side of herself, my priorities might shift.

If I succeeded, I might even prevent the Baek Empire’s invasion while charming someone perfectly suited to my tastes.

Of course, failure would likely hasten the invasion, but I’d deal with that when the time came.

As I quietly adjusted my plans for her, we arrived at the dorms before I knew it.

***

“…Haaa…”

The moment I bid farewell to Dogeon and entered my room, I collapsed to the floor, leaning against the door. It wasn’t dignified, but I didn’t have the energy to care.

He really called me his friend.

Friend, friend, friend…

The only person I’d ever considered a friend in my original world was that twisted individual. This was such a foreign feeling.

I'd always thought that if I ever had a friend, I'd be warm and talkative with them. But now that it had happened, I felt like I'd only managed 20% of what I'd envisioned.

Still, I felt slightly wronged.

Dogeon had blindsided me with that question about friends, catching me off guard. Worse, his attention was suffocating.

How could one person's focus feel heavier than the interest of dozens? It was almost crushing.

Even after I insisted I was fine, he kept apologizing, making me feel increasingly self-conscious.

And then there was how he called me Hoyeon.

The only people who had ever addressed me that way were my parents. Hearing it from someone else felt… strange. Not bad, just really strange.

"…Haa."

I guess I'll have to call him Dogeon, too.

"Do…"

"…"

"Do…!"

Nope, I couldn't do it. The words stuck in my throat. Besides, the walls here weren't very soundproof. If someone overheard me practicing, I'd die of embarrassment.

As I writhed in self-inflicted agony on my bed, a bead slipped from my pocket and rolled onto the floor.

Oh, right. This was the bead Stefania had given me. She'd said something about wanting to have tea together sometime, but I'd completely forgotten.

While Stefania seemed like she wanted to befriend me, something about her made me hesitant. Dogeon might not have been the purest, but Stefania was on a whole different level.

Even without her characteristic squinty eyes, she exuded an air of slyness. The gaze she'd given me earlier felt anything but innocent.

…Was she a textbook example of a kuksaere character? Maybe.

Either way, I doubted I'd get close to her.

I placed the bead on my desk, wrote in my journal for Mother, and lazed around until it was evening.

While I could've gone to dinner alone now that I knew my way around, meals were better with company.

Friends eat together. With that thought, I knocked on Dogeon's door.

No answer.

Worried he might have fallen asleep, I tried the handle. Once again, the door wasn't locked.

Was Dogeon just forgetful, or did he trust too easily? First his locker, now this.

The room was empty.

So I'd been shadowboxing my own assumptions about him being next door?

Just as I felt a twinge of regret, Dogeon walked in holding an old scroll.

"…Oh, you're… here?"

"How did you get in this time?"

His genuinely startled tone compelled me to explain.

“Uh, the door wasn’t locked…”

His expression practically screamed, Seriously?

“Don’t look at me like that…”

Stop looking at me like I’d committed a crime. The door opened—it wasn’t my fault!

“Hoyeon.”

“…Yes?”

Despite knowing I’d done nothing wrong, his tone made me instinctively tense up.

“Come with me for a moment.”

Following him hesitantly, I found myself standing in front of his locker.

“Try opening this.”

“…Okay.”

I had no idea what he was thinking, but I obliged. When I pulled the handle, the locker opened easily.

As a wave of refreshing mana washed over me, I barely had time to process it before Dogeon, now wearing a serious expression, tried opening my locker.

Of course, it didn’t budge.

“Now try this locker,” he said, gesturing to another.

“That’s… someone else’s locker…”

“It’s fine. Just try.”

How was that fine? But I couldn't refuse. After all, he was my friend, and I already felt guilty.

Surprisingly, it opened just as easily as his.

"…Could it be?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind. Anyway, why were you in my room?"

What the hell was this? Why did he act so serious and then brush it off?

Lacking the courage to pry further, I just answered his question.

"Well… since we're friends, I thought we could… eat together…"

"…Oh. Sure, let's do that."

We didn't engage in much small talk on the way to the dining hall. Despite wanting to say something, seeing Dogeon in front of me left me tongue-tied.

After finishing a modest meal, we returned to the dorms.

Now was the time. It was just his name.

It wasn't a difficult task. Or so I thought until we reached his door.

"Uh… Dogeon…!"

"Yeah?"

Oh, no. I'd done it. My face burned with embarrassment.

"…Uh, nothing! Sleep well!"

He didn't seem fazed, simply wishing me the same before heading inside.

Once in my room, I buried my face in my pillow. Still, I'd done it—I'd called him Dogeon.

But more importantly… the day was approaching.

…Well, I'll figure it out somehow.

For now, I basked in my small victory and let sleep take me.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 26

Chapter 26: A Special Day (1)

When I was a child and my father told me that I too would experience a heat cycle someday, I felt as though the sky was falling.

Back then, to me, a heat cycle meant a terrifying experience where no matter what I thought, just catching a man's scent would bleach my mind blank and send shivers down my lower abdomen.

Even my father had said not to go near unfamiliar men during a heat cycle, so I thought it must be exactly as I feared. I spent a period trembling in dread.

But when I finally experienced it, it wasn't like that at all.

It just made me feel a little dull, as if a pink fog had settled in my mind. I became more sensitive to others and a little more irritable, but that was it.

For me, it was something that passed after a day of pestering my older brother, the captain of the guard, or being coddled by my mother.

So, even without my mother or my brother to rely on, I didn't think it would be a big deal.

As I wriggled on the bed, I felt my clothes crumple beneath me.

Why was I still wearing clothes? It didn't take long to remember. Yesterday, after calling out Dogeon's name, I had been so embarrassed that I rushed straight to bed without even undressing.

I had worked up all my courage just to call his name, and yet Dogeon's expression was so indifferent, as if it meant nothing to him.

Considering how handsome and good-natured he was, he had probably had countless girls call his name before. It wouldn't have surprised him at all.

…But now wasn't the time to be thinking about him. My clothes were still getting wrinkled as I lay there.

When I took them off and sniffed, I was relieved to find they didn't smell too bad. I could probably wear them a few more days before sending them to the laundry service.

Since the laundry was free and even delivered back to my room, I could use it without hesitation.

But I hadn't washed properly yesterday, so my body was bound to have a smell.

My parents always said I didn't smell bad, but that was probably just something parents said out of formality.

When I was a boy, they used to nag me to wash every day, saying I'd stink if I didn't.

In this body, it wasn't necessary to wash as frequently, but if I needed to, I could just pray to the deity.

The floor was a bit chilly, but it was perfect for regaining my focus. Kneeling, I offered a prayer to the deity for purification.

"—I beseech the deity, please rid this body of all impurities."

…Huh? Why wasn't it working? Was something wrong? I tried praying again, but there was no response from the deity.

Ah, that's right. The deity wasn't in good condition. How could I forget something so simple?

I briefly worried that the deity might overexert themselves if they woke up, but it seemed they were still in a deep slumber.

That was a relief, but the fact remained—I smelled.

I had no choice but to wash with water, like in the past. The problem was, I didn't know how to bathe as a woman.

I had always relied on prayers to the deity to stay clean. I'd never actually poured water over myself.

Just the thought of being soaked gave me goosebumps. While tigers weren't supposed to fear water, the idea of being drenched or submerged made my skin crawl.

Still, I had no choice. The fear of being mocked for smelling bad outweighed my discomfort.

The memories tied to it were enough to help me overcome my instinctive fear.

I had never thought I'd actually step into the bathroom. Grumbling, I took off my undergarments.

The reflection of a naked girl stared back at me in the mirror, but I didn't feel any excitement or other emotions.

Maybe because I'd been familiar with this body since I was young, it didn't seem particularly provocative.

The only impression I had was that everything seemed proportionate where it mattered.

Picking up what was unmistakably a showerhead, I noticed that the faucet didn't have any hot or cold markings.

The presence of a showerhead made sense, given that this world was originally a novel setting, but not marking hot and cold water? What was with that?

Well, left for hot and right for cold, probably. I wasn't a fan of cold water, so I turned the faucet to the left.

It's common sense to wash from the top down. As soon as the water flowed, freezing cold droplets cascaded over me.

I didn't even have time to react before I shut off the water.

…I nearly had a heart attack. This continent loved to mess with people in weird ways. From strange customs to this nonsense.

With trembling hands, I turned the faucet the other way. This time, I cautiously checked the temperature with my hand before soaking my head.

Sure enough, this continent was absurd. The water was almost boiling hot. Adjusting the faucet to get it lukewarm, I could finally start washing.

It was nice to enjoy the warmth for a while. When I finally began scrubbing, I noticed there was a lot of stuff in the bathroom.

I recognized body wash and shampoo, but what were all these other things —conditioner, treatments?

I decided not to touch what I didn't understand.

I just soaked a shower towel with body wash and scrubbed my skin, though the sensation was strangely unusual.

"…Hng."

The closest comparison might be ticklishness. Every time I scrubbed, I felt a peculiar sensation.

Maybe my condition was off because the green orb wasn't around.

Every time I brushed over sensitive areas, odd sounds like "hng" or "ngh" escaped my lips, but it was probably just because I was unused to this. It was my first time washing with water, after all.

As for my hair, I'd heard women needed a lot of shampoo. How much was enough? One or two squeezes didn't seem to cut it.

I ended up using so much that it coated my entire head in foam, but at least I felt satisfied with the results. For someone shampooing their hair for the first time, I thought I did a good job.

"Huh?! Ngh!"

That is, until I accidentally got water in my ears while rinsing the foam.

In the end, I managed to get the water out without much trouble, though I had twisted my body into all sorts of awkward positions and nearly smashed my head into the wall.

Looking at my reflection in the fogged mirror, I saw a pitiful, water-soaked cat staring back at me.

By the time I stepped out of the bathroom, the sun had already risen. It had been dark when I went in, so how long had I been washing?

"—You've come out."

Lost in thought, I barely registered the faint voice addressing me.

It was so weak that I wouldn't have noticed if I weren't paying attention. When I'd spoken with the deity in the gymnasium, I could hear them clearly even without focusing. Had they grown weaker because of me? The thought made me feel gloomy.

"—Deity, did you wake up because of me?"

"Indeed. How could I call myself a deity if I ignored the prayers of my sole follower? Moreover, you are the child of Onbyeolbi. If anything, I am sorry for being late."

"No, I should be the one apologizing. Please, if you're overexerting yourself because of me, I beg you not to."

“Ho, are you concerned that your request has burdened me? Admirable, but worry not. It was not your plea that caused this. I would not collapse from merely lifting a finger. Speaking of which, you prayed for purification, did you not?”

If that wasn’t the cause, then what had weakened the deity so much? I wanted to ask, but they didn’t seem willing to answer.

If it had been a person, I might have pressed for an answer, but I could only respect the deity’s wishes.

“No, I’ve already bathed. If you wish to bestow your grace, drying my hair would be enough.”

“Once again, such modest wishes. Do you lack ambition? If you desire, I could make the boy in the room next to yours obey your every command.”

“…You were watching?”

The realization hit me so hard that I forgot to maintain formal speech with the deity.

I had thought they were asleep due to their poor condition, but had they been watching me all this time, like the deities back home?

“Hahaha. I thought you were only polite, but you have a cute side too. It’s hard to believe you’re Onbyeolbi’s child. To answer your question, I caught glimpses of you as though in a dream.”

“A-ah…”

That meant they had seen me reveal my true self to Dogeon, calling him my friend.

The embarrassment was overwhelming. I buried my face in a towel as I felt the wind blow against my hair, drying it.

“Thank you, Deity. But could you leave me alone for now?”

“Oh dear, a rather unpleasant contractor is calling. Farewell for now.”

“…Contractor?”

The idea of someone forming a contract with a deity seemed absurd. However, the deity didn’t seem to be lying. While the thought left me puzzled, the deity had already departed, leaving me to contemplate the matter.

Still, there was something far more pressing than that question.

The deity had said they had seen my true self—my awkward, outcast-like behavior.

What was I supposed to say to Dogeon when I saw him?

Behaving as I usually did would be fine, but that would only invite troublesome rumors.

It was a given that an imperial princess showing friendliness toward a commoner would spark interest. I didn’t want to give other girls a reason to criticize me for associating with someone of lower status.

Dogeon had a face that could be considered top-tier, but that wasn’t the issue. For some reason, my thoughts kept drifting in odd directions today.

Father had told me not to reveal my true self in front of others.

If I acted casually with Dogeon when we were alone, then…

Yes, I would follow Father’s teachings when in public.

Even after dressing myself, I still couldn’t finalize a perfect plan.

Still, since we were friends, it should be okay to at least call him by name.

When I stepped out of my room, as if by fate, Dogeon was leaving his room at the exact same moment.

Alright, then…

“Han Dogeon. Come here.”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 27

Chapter 27: A Special Day (2)

“…Huh?”

How should one react when someone who had shown a shy, girl-like demeanor yesterday suddenly reverted to a high-handed imperial princess overnight?

“What are you staring dumbfounded for? I told you to come here.”

Baek Hoyeon’s tone left no room for refusal. Her demeanor made it clear that disobeying wasn’t an option. Regardless of what had happened yesterday, she had always been in a position of power. Reluctantly, I approached her.

And then… I didn’t know how to describe what came next.

“…What are you waiting for? Hurry and take my hand.”

In short, after calling me over with an even more commanding attitude than the day before, she wanted me to hold her hand. How was I supposed to interpret that?

“Oh, um, sure. Hoyeon…”

When I took her hand, it was warmer and softer than I had expected. It reminded me of the paw pads of a kitten.

Yet, despite the tenderness of her hand, the atmosphere felt as tense as if a blade were pressed against my throat.

“Address me as Lady Hoyeon.”

She really seemed to have two distinct personalities. One was the imperial princess, and the other was the girl. There was no other explanation for how someone could change so drastically.

“…Understood, Lady Hoyeon.”

No matter how beautiful she was, her imperial princess persona was still intimidating.

Of course, even in that state, she could occasionally be endearing. But it was like watching a tiger do something quirky—it might be cute, but it was still a tiger. And a tiger could kill with a single swipe.

For now, I had no choice but to do as she wished.

As we walked hand-in-hand, a sweet scent drifted through the air.

It didn’t seem to be coming from the dining hall, as there hadn’t been any food smells there yesterday or the day before. Curious, I couldn’t help but wonder where it was coming from.

“Lady Hoyeon, do you smell something sweet?”

It was definitely nearby, but I couldn’t pinpoint the source. The scent was oddly mixed with an animalistic undertone.

For someone like her, a beastkin with heightened senses, there was no way she wouldn’t notice such a distinct smell.

“You’ve been talking too much. I smell nothing. Keep walking.”

Strangely enough, she didn’t seem to notice anything. Based on her prior actions, she clearly possessed heightened senses, but maybe her sense of smell wasn’t as sharp.

Yet, the lore described beastkin as having their keenest sense in smell.

I supposed there were always exceptions. Just as not all elves were racists, not all beastkin had the same abilities.

In Hoyeon's case, perhaps her hearing was her strongest sense. After all, she had picked up a growling sound from a high altitude with startling clarity.

As we walked, I fiddled with the state window scroll I had retrieved from the library earlier. However, for some reason, it wouldn't activate.

Even when I channeled mana into it, nothing happened. Worried I might have picked up the wrong one, I mentally reviewed its description, but it matched perfectly.

There had to be some unknown condition preventing it from working.

Hoyeon's piercing gaze wasn't helping. Even someone oblivious would notice how intently she was staring at me.

I wanted to ask her why she was staring, but I knew she'd probably just order me to shut up and keep walking, like earlier.

Her shy demeanor from last night had been difficult to handle, but it was preferable to this.

Surrounded by the sweet scent and under her predatory gaze, I had no choice but to hold her hand until we reached the classroom.

I didn't dislike it, but her overwhelming position of power made it a bit uncomfortable. It wasn't bad to grow closer this way, but I wished we could be more equal.

Like friends.

Even after sitting down, the strange scent lingered, making it impossible to focus on the lesson.

It was a mix of sweet floral notes and a distinct animalistic scent.

And most notably, Hoyeon's tail kept brushing against my leg.

I couldn't tell if she was doing it on purpose or if she was unaware, but her tail had been brushing against me consistently since the first period.

As much as I didn't want to upset her today, I decided I had to speak up.

"Lady Hoyeon, your tail has been brushing against my leg for a while. Could you please keep it still?"

She looked at me silently, and for a moment, I regretted saying anything.

"Oh, has it? …Sorry."

To my surprise, she apologized. Her tone had softened considerably, and her face even seemed slightly flushed, though she avoided meeting my gaze, so I couldn't be certain.

Yeah. If she could just stay like this, it'd be perfect—not too overbearing like her imperial persona, but not overly meek like last night either.

"Please refrain from idle chatter during class, Han Dogeon."

"Yes, I'll be careful."

The grumpy-looking teacher scolded me, but at least Hoyeon's tail stopped brushing against me after that.

With one distraction gone, I still couldn't fully focus on the lesson, but I was able to start planning what to do next.

Yesterday, I hadn't had the chance to think about it because of Hoyeon, but starting today, I decided to give Exipri a candy each day.

Cecilia and Gloria weren't relevant yet, as their time hadn't come, and Iris was nowhere to be found, so she was out of the picture for now.

Anastasia had scolded me about valuing family, but given the many events we'd shared, I wasn't too worried about her.

As for Camilla, we would naturally grow closer during the absurd midterm exam involving a three-day survival test in the wild, so there was no need to make extra effort with her.

That left Exipri as the most immediate priority.

Although my wallet wasn't in great shape, I didn't feel it was a waste. Raising favorability with just a piece of candy was a bargain.

Gloria, a late-stage heroine, required either slaying demon-worshipers myself or offering them to her, making her route much harder.

I wondered how difficult Hoyeon's route was.

Based on how she acted last night, she seemed like an incredibly easy heroine who could be won over with just the word "friend." But her usual demeanor suggested otherwise.

It was foolish to judge someone after just three days, but this world didn't feel entirely real to me, so maybe that's why I was treating it so lightly.

When lunch arrived, Hoyeon naturally grabbed my hand and started leading me somewhere.

This was odd—the dining hall was in the opposite direction.

With my senses on high alert, I checked for anyone around us, but it was just the two of us—Hoyeon and me.

Good. Here, we could speak freely.

"Uh, Lady Hoyeon? This isn't the way to the dining hall. Did you perhaps mistake the path?"

"…I'm sorry!"

"…What?"

“I lied this morning when I said I didn’t smell anything! That scent—it’s probably coming from me. I was too embarrassed to admit it… And also, the way I spoke earlier…”

“Uh, Hoyeon? Could you slow down a bit? Are you saying that scent is from you?”

***

I had realized from the moment I first spoke to Dogeon this morning that I had messed up. But I couldn’t take it back without breaking the resolve I had steeled myself with, so I kept speaking high-handedly.

And when he mentioned the scent, it was obviously from the ridiculous amount of shampoo I had used, but my embarrassment made me deny it to the end.

Was it right to treat a friend like this, even with the difference in status? If someone had asked me to be their friend and then treated me like a subordinate the very next day, I would’ve felt betrayed.

And I had done just that to him.

The shame and guilt made me want to prostrate myself on the ground.

“Please… don’t hate me.”

Bowing my head, I spoke in a quiet, trembling voice. It was the best I could manage.

Even during class, I couldn’t stop my tail from moving. I didn’t know why I kept making such stupid mistakes today.

Could it be because of the heat cycle? But this hadn’t happened before.

“…First, take a deep breath and calm down.”

I inhaled and exhaled as Dogeon instructed, but it didn’t help much.

“So, the scent was from you. I thought it smelled nice and was just curious about where it was coming from. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Wait. That wasn’t what I expected at all. He thought the scent was nice?

My face grew hot with embarrassment. What was I supposed to say to that? I was secretly happy, but…

“B-but, friends aren’t supposed to lie to each other… I lied…”

“Well, friends can lie to each other sometimes too.”

Wow. You’re actually an incredibly kind person. Not only had you called me a friend yesterday, but now you’re brushing off my lie so easily.

Was this the kind of magnanimity needed to be popular?

“By the way, why were you talking like an imperial princess earlier, but now you’re acting like a friend?”

Oh, that…

…I guess it wouldn’t hurt to tell him. With his level of understanding, he’d probably accept it.

“Well… no matter how much we’re friends, you’re a commoner, and I’m a princess… So I was worried that people might spread strange rumors about us. You weren’t upset, were you? I’m sorry…”

“So that’s why. You’re saying you’ll act like a princess when people are watching to avoid strange rumors about a princess and a commoner being close, right?”

“…Yeah.”

Saying it like that felt like I was unilaterally declaring that I’d act superior in public. It didn’t sit well with me.

“So, the reason you brought me here was to apologize somewhere private?”

“…Yeah.”

“Then, could I ask you for one small favor?”

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 28

Chapter 28: A Special Day (3)

"…If it's your request, I'll agree, but there better not be a single lie in your words."

"I swear. It's just to retrieve something from an unused storage room. Nothing shady, purely a part of my hobby, I assure you."

Hoyeon reverted to her imperial princess demeanor, as if reassessing her surroundings. But to me, it felt unnecessary.

She claimed to care about others' opinions, yet she had been holding my hand all day. Why cling to her regal act while being so openly familiar?

Since morning, she hadn't let go, not even during lunch. She'd asked to hold hands at the cafeteria too, and I'd had to tell her to tone it down because of all the stares.

Only then had she seemed to realize, blushing faintly and eating in silence. It was… adorable.

Today, she seemed like a lonely little niece, though her appearance was anything but childlike.

A child starved for companionship.

Despite being the confirmed heir, could she have no friends at all? That seemed unlikely.

Perhaps she had been surrounded by people but, for some unknown reason, ended up at this academy. Maybe she'd caused trouble or her father, determined to raise her strong, had sent her here with minimal protection.

That might explain her initial hostility and the occasional vulnerability she'd shown me.

Being far from home, in a place filled with people of a different race, left her with only her authority to rely on. Naturally, she'd used it as her shield.

It was probably the only method she knew. Given her parents' tendencies, diplomatic approaches likely weren't in her repertoire.

Her father was a conqueror, and her mother—well, she'd caused a landslide just to test me when we first met.

Still, one thing puzzled me.

Why had she been kind to me, despite her bristly demeanor toward everyone else?

I hadn't told her my parents were from the Eastern Continent. Yet, she'd called me over and handed me bread out of nowhere.

Was it my looks? That seemed doubtful. Even in our class, there were several who were better-looking than me.

No matter how I reasoned it, the answer wasn't clear. I could only guess that she was inherently kind beneath it all.

"If it's just an empty storage room, you could've gone alone. Why did you call me?"

The truth? I needed to retrieve evidence—proof that Stefania was creating demonic magic users—for Gloria later. But that storage room was sealed with magic, and I needed Hoyeon to open it.

Of course, I couldn't say that.

Still, I did need her to unlock the door.

My suspicions had started when she opened my room door too easily. Watching her also unlock others' lockers had confirmed it.

For some reason, she could bypass magical seals effortlessly.

Thanks to her, I could skip an entire section of frustration where Stefania's schemes were revealed piece by piece. There was no way I was missing this opportunity.

And I had the perfect excuse.

"There's a rumor that the place is haunted. Honestly, I'm a little scared to go alone. Besides, we're friends, right?"

"Friends… Ehe, ahem! Hmm. Yes, that's right. Because we're friends. Fine."

Her demeanor changed in an instant. Just the word "friend" had her practically glowing with delight.

It made me think she might be even easier to please than Exipri.

She wasn't even in the original work, so calling her a "heroine" felt strange.

A moment ago, it had seemed like she was reluctantly helping me. Now, her steps were light and cheerful.

Suddenly, I felt a pang of guilt. Was it really right to lie to someone who trusted me so much?

But I had no choice. Who would believe me if I said this world was a novel and that I was pulled into it from a place called Korea?

Even my parents, if they were here, would probably just tell me to rest because I looked tired.

Let alone someone who'd only been my friend for a day.

If the time ever came when I could tell her everything, I would. For now, I matched her pace.

And, of course, I kept holding her hand.

***

Even though Dogeon was the protagonist of a harem story, I couldn't help but feel cautious when he asked me to go to an empty storage room.

When I had wandered into that alley earlier, it had been purely to apologize to him. But when a harem protagonist suggests going to a secluded place, it's hard not to be suspicious.

Still, when he called me his "friend," nothing else mattered. And no, it wasn't because of my heat cycle. I had my own reasons.

Friends don't do that kind of thing.

Honestly, maybe the heat cycle wasn't such a big deal after all. My baseless confidence drowned out any inner voice of caution.

Besides, I hadn't expected Dogeon to be scared of ghosts. Sure, in a world where spirits were real, it made some sense. But they weren't usually harmful.

Most spirits just needed someone to listen to their grievances and would move on after being appeased. There was no real danger.

What kind of man feared ghosts?

Well, I was a woman now, but I still thought of myself as a man.

"We're here."

Why did he need me to open this door? It didn't seem to have any locks, magical or otherwise. Why not just open it himself?

“You can open this much on your own, can’t you? Are you seriously going to ask a woman to open a door for you?”

“Ah, well… It’s just…”

Dogeon hesitated, dragging his words out. It was as if he fully expected me to do it for him.

“Could I… ask you as a friend?”

“…Are you serious?”

Sigh. Fine. Just this once. At this rate, he’d probably ask me to fetch water for him next.

Then again, hadn’t he done that before, when I was a guy? He’d once come to my house, taken over my computer to play games, and demanded water when he got thirsty.

I’d been so annoyed, but then he’d thrown me 50,000 won. “I’m your servant,” I’d declared, grabbing the water.

But Dogeon wouldn’t do something like that. He was kind.

The storage room door, though rusted, opened without a sound. The academy’s wealth never ceased to amaze me—even a neglected room like this was meticulously maintained.

Capital was truly a marvel.

“…It’s cleaner than I expected.”

I knew saying that would tempt fate, but I couldn’t help myself. The room was far too well-kept for a supposedly unused space.

“Yeah, it is.”

“There’s no one here, so you can talk normally now…”

Outside, there were appearances to maintain, but here it was just us. There was no need for her to play the princess.

“If you say so. Hmm, I’ll start looking for what I need.”

As she let go of my hand and began searching, I grabbed her hand again before she could leave. She turned to me, confused.

“…I’ll come with you!”

“There’s really no need…”

“You said you were scared of ghosts. I can talk to them, you know. If one shows up, I might be able to help.”

I didn’t want to miss the chance to impress my friend. Besides, I didn’t want to be alone today. It had to be because of the heat cycle—when I was younger, I’d always slept with my parents during this time.

This loneliness was impossible to overcome.

“Oh, right… Thanks. Let’s look together then?”

“Yeah!”

Despite my bold words, the storage room wasn’t very big, and there weren’t many items. Dogeon quickly found what he was looking for.

It seemed to be a stack of documents. I skimmed through them, but nothing stood out as important.

“…So, this is what you came for?”

How anticlimactic. I’d thought he was after some rusted legendary sword or a secret manual from a senior.

You know, the usual stuff you find in academy settings. But instead, it was a boring stack of papers.

“Yeah, it was a huge help! Thanks, Hoyeon.”

“Oh? Uh, sure… No problem…”

I wasn’t sure it was worth such gratitude, but it felt good to be helpful.

As we were about to leave, I tugged on Dogeon’s hand again, stopping him.

“Now what…?”

“Quiet.”

He seemed to sense something was wrong too, falling silent.

Someone was approaching, heading straight for the storage room.

I hoped it was just my imagination, but if they came in, we’d be discovered.

The only exit was the door we’d entered through. Where could we hide?

As the footsteps grew closer, I spotted a tall locker. It was narrow but just big enough for two people to squeeze inside.

“…Get in here!”

“Whoa?!”

There was no time to explain. I pulled Dogeon into the locker with me, and shortly after, the door to the storage room creaked open.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 29

Chapter 29: A Special Day (4)

Stefania clicked her tongue the moment the alarm from her detection spell rang out.

It was likely just some small fry taking the bait, interrupting her enjoyable time for nothing. But as soon as she realized where the spell had been triggered, her irritation vanished.

Had it been an unimportant location, she would have dismissed it as the church's pawns making another futile effort.

But the site in question was the warehouse concealing the sanctum where her contracted demon was summoned. She had no choice but to pause her habitual torment of Iris.

"Yes, Iris. It seems I have business to attend to, so let's end here for today."

She released Iris, who trembled like a frightened squirrel, and watched the girl stagger out of the room.

Stefania's enjoyment of the scene lasted only briefly before her mind raced, sorting through potential suspects. One name quickly surfaced: Gloria.

She'd noticed Gloria's recent increased activity but hadn't thought she would locate the sanctum.

Information about the sanctum had only been shared with Stefania's most trusted inner circle. How had that brute managed to find out?

Though curious, Stefania wasn't overly concerned. She suspected Gloria had coerced or beaten the information out of someone in her circle who was either weak or dissatisfied. Several possible candidates came to mind.

Deciding it was time to reevaluate her inner circle, Stefania grabbed her staff and cloak.

If it were mere pawns, she could easily eliminate them with a single spell. But to face Gloria, she needed to prepare thoroughly.

Stefania's first encounter with Gloria had been memorable. At the time, she thought Gloria was just another nuisance sent by the church and planned to deal with her personally.

The so-called apostles of the church had always crumbled quickly under her magic, so even when Gloria revealed herself as the First Apostle, Stefania felt confident, mocking how long Gloria could endure.

But the moment Gloria began wielding two massive greatswords, cleaving through Stefania's spells, Stefania realized something was wrong.

Though she managed to break both swords, Gloria charged at her, imbued with divine power, landing a crushing blow that left Stefania no choice but to flee.

That had been three years ago.

Today, Stefania was determined to settle the score. Fully equipped, she teleported to the warehouse, surrounded by four layers of protective barriers to prepare for an ambush.

Yet, as she arrived, she found no sign of the carnage she'd anticipated—no torn doors, no signs of brute force.

The warehouse was intact.

The lock on the door had been neatly disengaged, further deepening her confusion.

To her knowledge, Gloria had no allies capable of surpassing her own magical prowess.

If Gloria hadn't ripped the door open with brute force, the only alternative was that she had flooded the area with divine energy to disrupt the spell. Yet Stefania, who could sense divine energy, saw no traces of it.

Her protective magic on the door had been bypassed, someone had entered the warehouse, neutralized her defensive spells, and even triggered an alarm —deliberately.

That was Stefania's conclusion.

Someone wanted me to come here.

But Stefania pushed the thought aside. She would uncover the truth once the intruder was dead.

While she wasn't an expert in supportive magic, she was a master of destructive spells. No matter who the intruder was, she was confident she could kill them, even if it took time.

Entering the warehouse with a murderous aura, she spread a wave of mana to scan the area.

The reflection of her mana revealed no hidden presences.

The only noticeable disturbance was the disarray of the previously organized storage room.

Stefania didn't immediately investigate what might have been taken. Instead, she headed straight for the hidden sanctum.

The spell concealing the sanctum was intact, much to her surprise.

If it wasn't Gloria, who had dismantled her spells, entered the warehouse, triggered the alarm, and then disappeared without a trace?

Who could it be?

The mystery left Stefania perplexed.

Regardless of their motive, it was clear they were skilled, aware of the sanctum's location, and bold enough to provoke her.

Rattled but resolute, Stefania began searching for what was missing.

It took her some time to sift through the disorder, but eventually, she realized a single document was missing.

A carefully crafted plan to completely eliminate the church's influence from the academy during the final exams.

The document detailed a plan to sacrifice humans to demons, turning them into demon-bound beings under Stefania's control. These beings would be unleashed to annihilate suspected church affiliates.

She had already selected potential sacrifices and was eager to execute her plan.

Now, it was too risky. If someone knew about it, implementing the plan would expose her.

Disappointed, she resolved to use more conventional methods to eliminate the church's influence, relying on demon beasts during exams instead.

Stefania left the warehouse, deciding to delegate the cleanup to Iris.

***

"…She's gone?"

"…Yeah, looks like it."

Emerging from the locker, the fresh air felt so good it was almost intoxicating.

The cramped space had been suffocating, made worse by the mix of Dogeon's scent and shampoo. Meanwhile, Dogeon kept shifting

uncomfortably, wriggling against me.

And what was with rubbing his… leg? …against my stomach? Didn't he realize how awkward that was for both of us?

I couldn't identify who had entered, partly because Dogeon's scent had overwhelmed me. Not that I disliked it—it was actually kind of nice—but still.

Being so close to someone who wasn't family felt unfamiliar.

Pressing against him like that, I could feel his heartbeat and body heat. It wasn't unpleasant, though it left me flustered.

Dogeon took a deep breath, savoring the fresh air. I envied him—he probably found it genuinely refreshing.

"…Sorry for pulling you into the locker without warning. I didn't have time…"

"It's fine. You meant well."

"…By the way, were you… uncomfortable?"

I had intended to scold him for his excessive fidgeting, but it felt wrong to criticize someone who'd just been so understanding.

"…Why do you ask?"

"Well… you kept rubbing your leg against my stomach. Were you that uncomfortable?"

Dogeon froze, avoiding eye contact as he scratched the back of his head.

"…It wasn't my leg."

What? Then…

"Wait, was it your arm?"

No way. Was he that oblivious? I started piecing things together, my mind racing. It wasn't his arm, nor his leg, so…

Considering our proximity and the position…

My face burned. Oh no. OH NO.

"…I-I see…"

"…It's not something I could control. There wasn't much space…"

I realized we'd also been chest-to-chest, which made his explanation somewhat understandable. But I had been the one to drag him into the locker and signal for silence.

…I'd never been this foolish, even during a heat cycle.

Desperately avoiding eye contact, I noticed there were much better hiding spots—wardrobes and even strange holes in the wall.

I should stay indoors for the rest of the day. If I went out again, who knows what might happen?

But… it was… big.

No, no, stop! You're a man—well, you used to be. Stop this train of thought!

"Ugh…"

"…I'm really sorry. I'll make it up to you later, but let's get out of here first. Someone else might come."

"…Yeah, let's go."

His reasoning was sound, which only made me more annoyed. Why am I the one embarrassed when it's his fault?

"…Aren't you going to hold my hand this time?"

Dogeon extended his hand toward me as if expecting me to take it.

Like hell I will!

“No… Let’s just go.”

“Alright.”

We walked back, keeping a safe distance. Neither of us spoke, and yet all I could think about was what had happened.

That… thing pressing against my stomach.

It’s because of the heat cycle. That’s why I’m flustered. Definitely.

I wasn’t writing this in my journal—too mortifying.

Looking back at how irrational I’d been, I considered taking time off during the heat cycle, claiming poor health.

If women in my old world could skip school for menstrual cramps, surely this wasn’t too different.

Not that I’d actually go through with it.

Which meant I’d keep attending the academy, even in this ridiculous state.

…Can I really survive this academy without incident?

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 30

Chapter 30: A Special Day (5)

When she suddenly dragged me into the locker, I had no idea what was going on. But the moment I heard the door open, chills ran down my spine.

I hadn't sensed anything, yet she had. Her hearing must truly be exceptional—a hallmark of her beastkin heritage.

It was likely someone connected to Stefania. No one else had any reason to come here.

If anyone else had shown up, it might have been someone from the church, but they were far from uncovering any leads without the protagonist's intervention.

Regardless of who it was, Hoyeon clearly didn't want anyone to see us together.

As I crouched uncomfortably in the tight space, waiting for whoever had entered to leave, I became keenly aware of something.

With all my focus on the sounds outside, I hadn't noticed until now… but we were touching in several places.

Her chest, far softer and fuller than its appearance suggested, was pressing against me.

Her breath brushed against my neck, her limbs were unexpectedly delicate given her earlier strength, and her tail… her tail kept brushing somewhere

very precarious.

The locker was so cramped that any movement might alert the person outside. I stayed utterly still, but there were some things I couldn't control.

Please, not now. I mentally chanted the national anthem, recalled my military service, and even thought about corporate life—anything to stave off the inevitable.

Her soft abdomen pressing against me wasn't helping. Desperately, I prayed for self-control, and miraculously, I managed to calm myself down. But the damage had already been done.

Did she notice? Was she blushing, or still as focused as ever, ears perked in serious concentration?

If there were even a sliver of light in this pitch-dark space, I might have been able to tell, but there wasn't.

And the scent… a sweet, honey-like aroma filled the air. It was intoxicating, making it hard to think straight.

Honestly, I wanted to bury my nose in it. But of course, I couldn't. Not when the person emitting it was her. If only she weren't the child of those two…

Her complete lack of awareness regarding personal boundaries was something else.

She didn't seem to understand the concept of personal space at all, let alone the dynamics between men and women. It was almost like she truly had no friends before.

Her behavior—casually initiating physical contact, treating my requests so lightly, apologizing out of the blue—was utterly baffling.

Perhaps she wasn't even aware of her position, nor of the fact that she was a woman. She seemed so naive, so defenseless.

But I couldn’t take advantage of that. If this relationship was to mean anything, it had to come from her initiative. Any misstep on my part would be irreparable.

Still, winning her heart was only one part of the challenge. I’d have to gain the approval of her parents too. And that seemed…easier than fighting Onbyeolbi.

Maybe.

Though I was keenly aware of the danger of our current situation, a part of me selfishly wanted to stay like this just a little longer.

Thankfully, the person outside eventually left, sparing me from losing my composure entirely.

“…They’re gone?”

“…Yeah. Seems like it.”

As we stepped out of the locker, the cool air helped me think more clearly. The stifling heat in that cramped space must’ve gotten to my head.

Hoyeon, too, looked flushed. She fanned herself with her hand and had removed her jacket. Her sweat-soaked shirt clung to her body, making it semi-transparent.

Black.

Deep breaths. Calm down. I could pretend I hadn’t seen it in the dark earlier, but now? If I reacted, it was all over.

“…Sorry for dragging you into the locker without warning. I didn’t have time to explain!”

“It’s fine. You meant well.”

Honestly, if it weren’t for her, I might not have made it past this point in the story alive.

“…By the way, were you… uncomfortable?”

“…Why?”

She hesitated, as if debating whether to say it.

“Well… your leg… you kept rubbing it against my stomach. I was just wondering how uncomfortable you must’ve been to do that.”

My mind raced. Did she really think it was my leg? For a moment, I panicked, imagining she might demand servitude as penance. But no, she seemed genuinely unaware.

Was she this oblivious? It was worrying on a human level, not just a character one.

If she thought about it for even a moment, she’d realize what had been pressing against her stomach. Did she have no concept of anatomy?

Forget that—what had she been taught? Her lack of knowledge was concerning.

If someone with bad intentions came along pretending to be her friend… this continent would be doomed.

And then there was the guilt of continuing to deceive her.

She trusted me enough to call me a friend, yet I was lying to her face. A voice in my head whispered, How long will you keep deceiving her when she cares about you so much?

Maybe it was better to come clean now, even if it meant risking her anger.

If I explained myself and asked her to keep it a secret from her parents, she might agree.

She seemed willing to forgive a lot as long as it was framed as a “friendship” matter.

I made up my mind. Whatever punishment she meted out—whether it was a slap, a kick, or insults—I'd take it.

"…It wasn't my leg. But I'm sorry about that in advance."

"Wait… was it your arm?!"

Please, Hoyeon. Connect the dots. Don't make me say it.

"…It wasn't my arm either. But again, I'm truly sorry."

She paused, thinking hard. Finally, realization dawned.

"…Oh. Uh… ahhh…"

Thank goodness. At least she knows anatomy.

I couldn't believe I was relieved about something so basic.

"…I'm not trying to make excuses, but… it's not something I could control, given how cramped it was."

If I was confessing, I might as well come clean about everything. Hiding it would only make things worse later.

One thing I'd learned from my life before falling into this world was that honesty—however brutal—was better than secrets.

Hoyeon's face was now as red as a ripe apple. She hung her head low, clearly flustered.

I'd expected a punch or slap but… nothing.

We couldn't stay here forever. If someone from Stefania's camp came back, we'd be in serious trouble.

"I'm really sorry. I'll make it up to you later. But for now, we should go. Someone else might come."

She nodded weakly, still too embarrassed to meet my eyes.

“…Yeah. You’re right… Let’s go.”

I extended my hand to help her. She glanced at it but didn’t take it, her blush deepening.

“…Not this time. Let’s just go.”

“…Alright.”

We walked back in silence, keeping a noticeable distance. It felt awkward, but I couldn’t help thinking we’d suddenly grown too distant.

That night, I looked over Stefania’s stolen plan. But without a solid grasp of magic, it was mostly gibberish. My thoughts kept drifting back to Hoyeon.

Her touch, her scent…

No. Stop.

The day’s events had awakened something I’d been suppressing since arriving at the academy.

***

Back in my room, I felt oddly relieved after promising Hoyeon not to mention the day’s events again.

Honestly, if I were a guy in her position, I wouldn’t have been able to hold back either.

But her words—friendship matters—left a strange warmth in my chest.

***

I’d never had someone to share secrets with before. Was this what friendship was like?

Just as I was about to drift off to sleep, an unfamiliar sound caught my attention.

It was rhythmic, coming from Dogeon's room.

It sounded like… something being rubbed?

I couldn't place it, but I couldn't stop listening.

My body felt unusually warm. Was it the heat cycle?

The sound stopped after a few minutes, but not before Dogeon called my name.

Why?

I couldn't make sense of it.

Maybe I'll ask him tomorrow.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 31

Chapter 31

She asked,

I gazed up at the sky.

There was no dazzling sun or expansive blue heavens to be seen.

Only an enormous boulder, so massive it could obscure the heavens, defied nature's laws by floating in the sky.

…No, perhaps that very sight was the embodiment of nature itself. Immutable and unyielding, yet bending and contorting at a single word from a god—such was the way of the world.

From the moment we rebelled, refusing to become mere playthings for the gods, we were prepared to die. Yet, I hadn't anticipated such overwhelming retaliation.

There were no regrets, only lingering sadness. It pained me that this was as far as I could go—to think and act independently, to laugh and talk freely with my comrades—this was where it ended.

My comrades. Those who, even if only for a fleeting moment, resolved to reject the divine decree and live by their own will. I wondered what thoughts occupied their minds.

Were they despairing? Or blaming me? I imagined there might be such individuals among them. It seemed natural to think so.

But even as I heightened my senses, I detected no fear or loss of resolve. There was no one succumbing to despair, collapsing in surrender.

Instead, they gripped their weapons tightly, standing their ground with a determination that radiated murderous intent, their gazes fixed on the woman before them.

Truly, they were far too exceptional for someone like me. For one who defied the heavens to spare their daughter from being sacrificed, these comrades were nothing short of extraordinary.

…But this is the end. The love for my family, the hope for a tomorrow unlike today, and the dream of a future carved out by my own hands—all would end here.

Before us stood a woman as if she had swallowed a piece of the night sky. Her expression held either contempt for insignificant beings or mere curiosity.

Her form was similar to ours yet different, too modest and shabby to be called divine.

She was not enormous enough to envelop mountains. She did not radiate a halo like the sun. There was no crown of light, no lavish adornments, not even a decorative flourish.

She lacked ears to hear distant sounds or a tail for balance.

And yet, her mere presence was enough to declare her identity.

In numbers alone, we held an overwhelming advantage. Yet not a single person dared to step forward. Everyone understood that a single misstep would result in being torn to shreds.

—”Foolish humans. My small and fragile children, striving to live by your own hands. Listen and bow. This is the last mercy I will grant you.”

“…Onbyeolbi.”

Though her lips did not part, the words seemed to etch themselves directly into our minds. It was as if everyone present heard her voice.

—”Beg for forgiveness now, repent for your sins. If you wish to live, confess your wrongdoings. I am listening.”

I looked around. No one let go of their weapons. There were no sounds of people kneeling, confessing their sins, or pleading for mercy.

“…That will not happen.”

I spoke on behalf of everyone present. She neither sneered with ridicule nor grew enraged at our refusal to repent.

Her expression simply suggested that she had expected this outcome.

“We will not become your slaves again. Even if we must die, we will die as humans. Even if you are the creator of all things, we will not bend to your will.”

At this moment, I knew we were all of one mind. No matter what happened, we would not return to a life of mindless submission.

—”So, that is your will. Even if only for a moment, you wish to live by your own hands.”

“Yes.”

—”Even if that life is filled with pain and despair, do you still say so?”

“Yes.”

—”Then die.”

With a motion of her hand, the heavens began to tremble. The massive boulder, which had been still until now, began to plummet.

A brave man charged at her, but he vanished without a trace, leaving behind only his battle cry. Soon after, she disappeared as well.

Even if it crushed me, the boulder would not leave a single scratch. Could she have avoided it merely to keep her garments clean of dust? It was absurd that, in my final moments, such trivial thoughts crossed my mind.

At least, I wouldn't turn my eyes away from death.

***

The chirping of birds outside woke me.

Though "woke" might not be accurate—I hadn't been able to sleep due to that strange sound and the odd sensation tugging at my abdomen.

Rubbing my eyes, I regained my senses. I felt much clearer-headed than yesterday.

Well, the estrus cycle usually only lasts about a day anyway.

What a letdown. It wasn't anything like those explicit comics where you can't stop ogling men.

…Though, I did make contact. But that was my mistake. He even apologized, so I didn't hold it against him.

Embarrassing, sure, but I knew it was just part of being a guy. I'd once been one, so I could understand.

And holding hands…

Oh.

Now that I think about it, we spent all day holding hands yesterday.

After saying I didn't want anyone to find out, carefully modulating my tone, and all that, I went and held hands with him in plain sight?

Am I an idiot?

"Ugh…"

If I had thought for even a second, I wouldn't have done something so foolish. Just thinking about yesterday made me want to bury my head in my pillow.

But not everything that happened was bad.

Han Dogeon and I had grown closer. Not just as regular friends but as friends who shared secrets.

It felt like a triangle was forming in my heart just knowing there was something we were hiding from my parents.

That feeling wasn't unpleasant. I wasn't saying my current life was boring, but I'd never experienced anything as thrillingly taboo as this.

And, in both my past and present lives, I'd never had someone I shared such a deep connection with.

That troublesome guy from before? We played games together, and sometimes even slept over, but our relationship was always a little ambiguous.

Looking back now, it felt more like we were using each other.

I'd never felt like he genuinely cared for me the way Han Dogeon does.

I still didn't know why he called my name in his room yesterday, but it had to be proof that I was special to him, right?

He probably missed me and called my name because he was lonely.

Thinking about it that way made me happy. In my past life, no one had ever missed me as a person.

No one would have even known I was gone. I'd been working remotely for months before I disappeared, and my parents had passed away when I was in college.

I didn’t even see them for a week out of the year, so it wasn’t particularly sad.

That guy I used to call a friend had long since stopped contacting me. The only people who’d look for me would have been my landlord and maybe a tax officer.

Alright, enough with the gloomy thoughts. I have a friend now who cares about me deeply.

Determined not to repeat yesterday’s mistakes, I showered with my ears plugged.

Dogeon hadn’t complained, but since he said the shampoo smelled strong, I made sure to use less.

As an aside, I learned a new fact I didn’t want to know: drying women’s hair takes forever. It seemed dry, but water kept dripping from somewhere.

After throwing on the clothes I’d draped over a chair, I was about to leave when my diary caught my eye.

I’d written in it last night, so Mother must have read it by now.

I’d never lied to her before, but yesterday was the first time I did, and it made me strangely anxious.

“I’m relieved to see all is well. It seems you and Dogeon had no major mishaps. Now, if only your father would stop causing trouble.”

It felt like the triangle in my chest was spinning furiously.

“And soon, I hope you’ll find an answer to the question I asked you.”

Ah, right. There was that condition.

Can humans live without gods?

How should I answer that? Mother had a habit of asking these philosophical questions.

As a child, I could get away with running off, exuding an aura of "I have no idea what you're talking about." But not this time.

Mother had readily agreed to let me attend Amaurus Academy on the condition that I find an answer to that question. "That is my condition for letting you go," she had said.

She had reassured me that any answer would suffice, which only added to the pressure. I'd been so busy these past few days that I'd forgotten all about it.

I'd have to spend some time pondering this.

Which meant that today wasn't the time to dwell on it—I had four whole years to come up with an answer, after all.

Besides, humans just need to obey the gods, don't they? That's all it takes to live a peaceful life.

The clock showed I still had plenty of time. I heard activity from the next room—Dogeon was probably about to come out.

He'd just been showering, judging by the sounds earlier, so I decided to wait for him by the door.

If he missed me enough to call my name, it was only right to reciprocate.

Though, since other students were around, I couldn't talk to him like a close friend. Soon enough, Dogeon stepped out of his room.

As a friend, a little teasing should be fine, right?

"I heard it all. Last night, you called my name."

"…What?"

His face said, What on earth are you talking about? Heh, playing dumb? Not a chance.

I walked toward him slowly, as if interrogating him, and he started to back away nervously, which I found amusing.

A guy a whole head taller than me acting like this—it was kind of funny.

"…That's… um…"

"Well…"

When he started turning pale, I decided to let him off the hook.

"So, did you miss me that much?"

"…Yes. I get lonely easily, you see…"

A man, lonely? My inner grumpy old man had plenty to say about that. Besides, he wouldn't be lonely for long, not with the way things were going.

…But a friend is still a friend, even if they're frustrating.

Having practically pushed him to the entrance, I caught a whiff of his room's scent on him.

It smelled… odd. A musty smell mixed with something peculiar.

Familiar, somehow…

"Huh…?"

The estrus cycle should've ended, so why was my abdomen feeling tense?

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Let's go."

It must’ve just been a bad mood. Shaking it off, I headed to class with Dogeon.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 32

Chapter 32: Karma

The most talked-about topic at the academy recently was, of course, about Baek Hoyeon.

Whispers about a rivalry between the empire's crown prince and the southern duke's son, mysterious meetings between Stefania and a certain first-year student, and dubious rumors about midterms involving physical exams—all these were enough to fuel gossip.

But nothing intrigued Camilla as much as the rumors concerning Hoyeon. After all, the knights captured by Hoyeon's guards were part of her family's personal order.

On the very day of the incident, her father, the head of the family, had been away attending to other matters, leaving Camilla to sit at the negotiation table herself.

If she were to sum up her first impression of Hoyeon in a single word, it would be predator. A creature that naturally stood above others, disinterested in those below it.

In the end, there were no casualties or property losses—just a slight blow to the prestige of Camilla's family.

Compared to other territories, which faced reports of stolen food supplies or breached castle gates, it was a fairly favorable outcome.

But a young girl's wounded pride was another matter entirely. If Hoyeon had outright scorned her, she might have understood. Instead, Hoyeon had shown her nothing but complete indifference.

Having never once been treated as though she didn't exist, Camilla found the experience particularly jarring.

That was why she was determined to confirm the rumors herself.

The rumors that Hoyeon was seen with a man.

What kind of man could possibly draw the attention of someone who had shown utter apathy toward her? Camilla resolved to find out.

Surely, it must be a prince or a duke, she thought.

It was Camilla who had tipped off Anastasia about Hoyeon's dormitory location. Now, she stood at the entrance of the fourth dormitory, scanning the crowd with a sharp gaze as they exited.

Hoyeon's white hair, streaked with occasional black strands, and her distinct features as a member of another race made her impossible to miss —or so Camilla thought.

Even after an hour of constant vigilance, Camilla showed no signs of tiring. Her determination was unrelenting.

She even considered storming inside if Hoyeon didn't appear. But then, finally, Hoyeon came into view.

As the rumors said, she was indeed accompanied by a man. If Hoyeon had taken an interest in him, Camilla assumed she must know him. Her gaze shifted to the man.

She did recognize him. She had even exchanged words with him before. But he wasn't who she had expected.

She didn't know his name, but he was the audacious fool who had dared to hold Exipri's hand. A man so dull that he could be called the epitome of

mediocrity—a mere commoner.

And yet, he stood by Hoyeon's side.

As Camilla's mind filled with question marks, she noticed the two of them speaking to each other.

The moment she saw that, all other thoughts disappeared from her mind.

She couldn't restore her wounded pride, but she could at least give Hoyeon a similar wound.

That thought alone consumed her.

Camilla's malice toward Hoyeon began to spin its own tale.

A story of a princess daring to dream of forbidden love with a commoner. Whether the story was true or not didn't matter.

Whatever the case, it would be enough to cause Hoyeon trouble.

She felt no guilt. If anything, she considered herself the victim. And as for that commoner? He dared to hold Exipri's hand, after all.

Smirking at the thought of the trouble she was about to stir, Camilla turned and walked away.

***

For some reason, a girl I didn't recognize was staring at me with a fierce intensity.

Who was she? I couldn't even begin to guess.

After giving me a creepy smile, she disappeared. I couldn't help but wonder what her deal was. Dogeon, standing next to me, seemed entirely oblivious.

"Um, by any chance, when did you start hearing this?" Dogeon asked hesitantly.

Judging by the way he asked, I knew for sure. If he wanted to know when I started hearing it…

Since the very first day. I'd heard everything—the sound of him showering, humming to himself—all of it.

Most sounds didn't carry through the walls, but everything from Dogeon's room was unnaturally clear.

"Since the first day. Your snoring is quite the spectacle," I replied.

"…I see. I'll be more careful," he said.

That response made me uncomfortable. He was essentially saying he'd suppress any noise in his own space because of me.

It wasn't even that loud. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it.

"It's fine. It's not unbearable. By the way, can you hear anything from my room?" I asked.

If I could hear him, it only made sense that he could hear me too. That thought made me feel guilty.

"No, not at all," he said.

His expression made it obvious he was lying to spare my feelings. These rooms were probably just one big space divided by a thin wall.

I thought they were loaded, but here they were pulling dirty tricks like this. Figures—it's a school, after all. There's always someone skimming money off the top somewhere.

There was always that one person like this back in high school and university. People's behavior really is the same wherever you go.

But that was beside the point. Now that I realized I'd been overly sensitive about the noise, I felt I should make it up to him somehow.

I even considered making a favor coupon, just in case things like this kept happening.

No, wait. Do friends need something as formal as a favor coupon?

Dogeon aside, I had plenty of time to spare, so doing whatever he wanted didn't seem like a bad idea. It even aligned with my reason for being here.

Originally, I'd just planned to observe what he did, but doing things together might be more fun.

He was bound to get busy soon, mingling with girls and whatnot, so I wanted to spend time with him while I still could.

But how was I supposed to bring this up?

Apologizing for making noise wouldn't work since Dogeon had already insisted it didn't bother him. That'd make it sound like I was ignoring his kindness.

No good excuses came to mind…

Wait. If I didn't have an excuse, couldn't I just create one?

Maybe I could annoy him during class with my tail, then apologize afterward and tell him he could ask me for anything. That should work.

It was a bit contrived, but I doubted Dogeon would turn it down.

After all, it wasn't like he'd lose anything, and he was the type who craved companionship.

He probably wanted someone to be around him, even if he didn't say it outright.

Later, he'd likely have too many people vying for his attention, though.

"Is that so? Then let's go," I said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

On my first day, it had been disheartening to see people parting around me like Moses splitting the sea. But now, I found it rather convenient.

It was much better than having someone bump into me without even a single apology because they hadn’t noticed I was there.

Having even just one friend changed my perspective for the better.

So this is why people are always going on about how important friends are, I thought. Realizing I’d been living life at a loss, I let out a dry chuckle.

The morning assembly passed like a cloud drifting by, with no particularly important announcements.

By the time we got to math, right before lunch, it was finally time for action.

Dogeon was focused on the lecture.

He was furiously jotting down equations—or at least what looked like equations. His handwriting was so messy I couldn’t really tell.

On the other hand, I couldn’t concentrate at all. Math was the current subject, and I’d already learned all of this before.

The humanities classes we’d had earlier? History and general education? Those could go straight to hell.

Those were the kinds of subjects you could cram a week before the test. Acting like they were more important than math was ridiculous.

How could something purely based on memorization compete with math?

Anyway, Watching him focus like that made me hesitate. Was it okay to bother him?

But his focus also gave me the perfect excuse. Just poking him with my tail felt too minor for what I planned to ask, though.

Whatever. Here goes nothing.

I deliberately ran my tail across the back of his knee, just to annoy him. His reaction was bigger than expected, making me feel a little guilty. But in the end, it was for his benefit, so I didn't hesitate.

Anything he missed while I was bothering him, I'd explain later. After all, I'd done my fair share of tutoring in the past.

Granted, most of my students had been unmotivated slackers, so the results weren't great. But Dogeon, with his obvious enthusiasm, seemed like the type who would absorb what I taught.

Come to think of it, this guy was a total cheat code for life. Popular, studious, great with girls, brimming with charm.

…Life isn't fair.

I stabbed at him with my tail, fueled by a little resentment. After dozens of jabs, he finally called my name, pleading for me to stop. But I wasn't planning to.

It wasn't until the lecture ended that Dogeon was finally freed from my tail's relentless assault.

Maybe I overdid it a bit because of my emotions, but it seemed just right.

He was giving me a look that clearly asked, What grudge do you have against me to pull something like that?

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 33

Chapter 33: Crossed Lines

Most of her actions had a reason behind them. While she tended to act first and explain later, her motives usually made sense when she eventually got around to explaining them.

That's why I figured there must be some kind of reason for her behavior this time too. The moment lunch started, she gestured for me to follow her.

What could she want this time? Did she really need to be so bothersome about it? Various thoughts crossed my mind, but she remained silent.

Unable to bear the frustration, I asked her directly—why had she been pestering me with her tail during class despite my signals for her to stop?

"…There wasn't a reason?"

"Yep."

She claimed there was no reason. Just like that. As I was about to protest about how unfair it was for her to bother me without any reason, one word flashed through my mind: test.

Maybe this was some kind of test. It didn't matter why she wanted to test me—what mattered was that some women thrived on this kind of irritating behavior.

The type that expected you to read their mind perfectly or found satisfaction in watching others try to figure them out. It was an exhausting type, to say the least.

I hadn't pegged her as the type to play such tiresome games.

Then again, I'd been wrong before—like that sweet, kind older girl who turned out to be an extreme sadist. It was my mistake to judge people too quickly.

Still, she wasn't the kind of person to act without a reason. At least, that's how she'd come across to me so far.

If I had done something to upset her, I had no idea what it could be.

It wasn't as if she knew about the… questionable thoughts I'd entertained. I'd reassured myself that even if I yelled at the top of my lungs, the sound would barely carry next door. Surely, I was safe inside my room.

I hadn't even considered the possibility that her sharp hearing could pick up the faintest of noises.

So when she'd asked me why I'd called her name that morning, my heart nearly stopped.

If she'd figured out the reason, I was sure she'd cut ties with me immediately.

The thought that I'd ruined everything in a moment of weakness had nearly sent me spiraling.

But as it turned out, Hoyeon was more clueless than I'd given her credit for.

She might understand how the male body worked, but that was clearly the extent of it.

That misunderstanding saved me, but it only made her behavior more puzzling. Was this about something that happened yesterday? Or had she taken offense at some trivial action?

"If I did something you didn't like, I apologize as a friend," I said.

"Friend… Ehehe. That's sweet, but no, really, you didn't do anything wrong."

I didn’t expect her to brush it off, even after I’d brought up friendship.

Asking further would only make things worse, so I let it drop.

Still, it didn’t feel like she’d done all that without any reason.

She wasn’t the type to enjoy tormenting others for fun, which made her motives even harder to figure out.

“Um… About earlier, sorry for bothering you during class with my tail. I’m really sorry. As an apology, you can ask me for anything—any favor!” she said.

The way she said it, as if she’d rehearsed it a dozen times, was baffling.

It almost sounded like she was offering me an open-ended promise to do anything I wanted.

If she had scolded me, or even gotten mad, I could have understood. But this? This made no sense. She’d deliberately caused trouble just so she could apologize and offer a favor?

“…Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you doing this?”

I wanted to understand. Why bother creating a situation to apologize for? Why offer to do anything in return?

What was she thinking? I needed to know her reasoning.

“Because I did something wrong…”

“That’s not what I mean. I want to know why you did something wrong in the first place.”

“That’s, um…”

“You said I could ask for anything. So I’m asking this: tell me why.”

“Ugh…”

I realized I might be pushing her too hard, but my curiosity wouldn’t let me stop.

And since she’d already promised I could ask for anything, there shouldn’t be a problem.

“…Can’t you just let it go?”

She was looking up at me because of our height difference. Seeing her like that softened me a little, but I still needed an answer.

I had to know. Why had she done this?

It was unusual for me to feel this way—I knew it wasn’t good to make assumptions about people. But I couldn’t help myself this time.

She was completely unlike anyone I’d ever met.

“No,” I said firmly.

“Well… I thought that maybe if I did this, you’d stick with me more…”

When she finally explained, piecing her words together with effort, it all made sense.

She didn’t like being cooped up in her room doing nothing, but she also didn’t like doing things alone. So, she wanted to spend time with me.

But since she didn’t feel right just asking outright, she’d deliberately created a situation that would lead to her offering me something like an unlimited favor card. That way, I might want to stay by her side.

“You seem lonely too, and it’s not like you’d lose anything. Why are you making such a big deal out of this?”

Her tone grew more indignant as she spoke, and I realized I'd need to comfort her. But at least my curiosity was satisfied.

To think she'd make such a ridiculous suggestion for such a silly reason.

"…What if I had asked you for money because I didn't have any?"

She could have used any excuse, like asking to visit my room every night, or claiming it was something friends do. Even worse, someone else pretending to be her friend could have made those kinds of "requests."

Honestly, it was a relief that I was her first friend.

"D-Do you… need money?"

Wait, that's not where I was going with this.

"I-I've got plenty of money! So, if you're short on funds, just let me know. I can give you some anytime."

Somehow, I'd been turned into a trashy freeloader who extorts money under the guise of friendship.

The problem was, she seemed genuinely earnest about her offer.

Well, it made sense—her status probably meant she had more money than she could ever need. But it wasn't like I actually wanted her to give me any.

"No, it's fine. I'm not in such dire straits that I'd need to borrow from someone."

"No, I insist! We're friends… So, take it!"

Without a moment's hesitation, she handed me a bundle of gold coins, leaving me with a hard-to-describe feeling.

Could it be that she'd really lived without any friends until now, and I, her first friend, had become someone she clung to so desperately?

"…Have you ever considered making other friends?" I asked her, a mix of curiosity and pity coloring my voice. I still hadn't gotten a clear answer last time, so I was genuinely curious.

Her expression said everything. How could you even say that? It was written all over her face, like she was holding back the urge to yell.

I'd just taken her money and, instead of being thankful, was now poking at her most sensitive wound. I felt bad, but I couldn't help but ask.

Was it really so difficult for her to approach others? With her status, she could easily build a social circle if she wanted. So why didn't she?

"…Never mind. I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me," I said.

Her gaze was filled with resentment, and I had the feeling it was too late to fix things.

***

"…Have you ever considered making other friends?"

The moment I heard that, it felt like time froze.

Was this guy seriously asking me that? Him, of all people? Someone who made friends and dated girls as easily as breathing?

It was fine when my parents brought it up. After all, it made sense for parents to worry if their child went through life without any friends.

Mom wasn't too concerned, but Dad had gone out of his way to introduce me to countless people, trying to help me make friends.

Most of them either ran off scared or treated me with so much deference that no real connection formed.

But for someone as socially capable as him to ask me if I'd ever considered making friends? That was crossing the line. Sure, I hadn't put in much effort recently, but did he think it was easy?

People either assumed they'd gotten the wrong person and avoided me, or flat-out ran away if I so much as made eye contact. And he had the nerve to ask if I'd ever tried making friends?

Of course I'd tried. I'd attended club meetups and even gone to parties.

But it didn't work.

How was I supposed to deal with the overwhelming urge to run away every time I faced someone?

Now that I thought about it, I was getting angrier.

I'd apologized earlier and been interrogated in return, and now this guy had the audacity to poke at my deepest wound after taking my money.

"…I'm sorry. That was thoughtless of me," he said, trying to apologize.

But I wasn't going to forgive him. Not this time. Not even if he was my first friend.

"…"

Hmph. At least he realized he messed up. Still, I wasn't letting this slide.

…Maybe I'd keep this up for three days. No, two days should be enough. If I didn't talk to him for three days, he might go find another friend.

Ugh, why did everything go so wrong every time I tried to do something? Back home, I used to leave all decisions to the gods. Things always worked out then.

But the moment I started doing things for myself, it all turned into a mess.

Even so, I'd already decided. For two days, I wouldn't say a word to him. I wouldn't leave his side either, but I wouldn't speak.

If I stayed close, he'd feel too guilty to consider making other friends.

After shooting him one last glare, I turned and started walking toward the cafeteria.

Dogeon seemed to understand the mood and trailed behind me at a reasonable distance.

The stares of the surrounding crowd didn't bother me at all.

Maybe if I ate something spicy, this frustration would simmer down on its own.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 34

Chapter 34: Surveillance

For some reason, the food didn't taste good. I had picked the same items from the menu as yesterday, so why did it feel so different?

I wasn't eating alone, nor had I chosen anything that didn't suit my taste, yet I couldn't understand why today's meal tasted so unlike yesterday's.

Even if the atmosphere wasn't great, that shouldn't have made such a difference in flavor. So why?

I couldn't even tell whether the food was going down through my mouth or my nose. Not that it could actually go through my nose—if that happened, I'd end up coughing like my lungs were being wrung out.

It was just a figure of speech.

In any case, I barely managed to finish my meal, eating half-heartedly, and then I felt a strange sense of discomfort.

Even Dogeon hadn't said a word to me. Not that I had any intention of responding if he did, but wasn't it strange that he didn't say even a single word?

When someone seems upset, shouldn't the other person usually apologize and plead for forgiveness? What could he possibly think he's done so right that he's just sticking to my side, doing nothing at all?

I've hardly ever apologized or received an apology myself, so I'm not exactly an expert. But I do know that if you've done something wrong, you're supposed to say, This is what I did wrong, please forgive me.

For someone as socially adept as him, he surely wouldn't lack that much common sense.

His indifference irritated me even more, so I picked up my pace.

Of course, there was a limit to how far I could distance myself since there's a fundamental difference in physique. Even at my fastest walking pace, I could only manage a few steps ahead of him.

Not that it mattered, as he quickly caught up to me anyway. Frustrated, I tried to move even faster, but that would have essentially turned into running, so I gave up.

Part of it was also because I started to feel the gazes of the crowd on me.

I'd felt people's eyes on me before, but never like this—never with such blatant curiosity, as though I were being openly observed.

Was it because rumors were spreading? Maybe something along the lines of, That arrogant girl from another continent who tried to assert dominance from the moment she arrived.

…Why was it that such a rumor was circulating now of all times? I couldn't tell, but the timing was impeccably terrible.

If I'd been talking to Dogeon, I wouldn't have cared about the surrounding stares, but that wasn't an option now.

Whether I was showing my true self or a constructed persona, just having a conversation with him would have done wonders for my mental stability.

In truth, I was dying to talk to him even now, but if I did, he might see me as an easy mark, so I refrained.

What I want is a relationship where we can speak freely as equals—a true friendship.

…Although I was sulking this much precisely because I'd been ambushed by the very friend I thought I could trust.

Even between friends, there are lines you just don't cross.

Asking someone if they have any friends is, of course, highly insulting. I had thought that someone as socially capable as him wouldn't make such a stupid mistake, so my disappointment was immense.

No matter how disappointed I was, I wasn't planning to sever ties entirely.

Still, the walk back to the classroom was as unpleasant as could be. The air felt barely breathable, let alone satisfying, which only made things worse.

Originally, I'd planned to buy something from the snack bar and eat together in the shelter, but I wasn't in the mood for that anymore.

Looking at Dogeon's expressionless face, with no clue as to what he might be thinking, only made it worse.

Until P.E. class, I kept glancing at him to see how he was looking at me, but his reactions weren't what I wanted.

At least try to look remorseful. Not that I'd forgive him, but still—it's the thought that counts.

Since I'd already decided to keep following him, I might as well see what kind of P.E. class he had.

I'd been curious, having never paid attention to rumors or known what the class entailed.

More than anything, I wanted to watch and see if Dogeon would pull any more nonsense.

After all, this infuriating guy had poked at my wounds and was now trying to get along with others as if nothing had happened. I might have forgotten it because he's a friend, but at his core, he's still a harem protagonist.

He's the type who promises one woman his undying love, only to end up with three. Probably because the author lacked the creativity to write better relationships.

Just try talking to another girl—I dare you.

With that thought in mind, I headed to the gym with Dogeon.

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"Indeed, rumors can't be trusted."

Watching Dogeon and Hoyeon closely, Ethan was convinced once again that he was right.

"That's not the behavior of a loving couple, no matter how you look at it."

In the end, Ethan concluded, it was all just slander.

The idea that a foreign princess was obsessively clinging to some commoner she barely knew was something straight out of a novel.

From what Ethan observed, Hoyeon treated Dogeon more like a subordinate she occasionally bullied, displaying the demeanor of a superior.

It was a conclusion he reached after spending almost all his time tracking Hoyeon, except when she disappeared without a trace or returned to the dormitory.

Although they usually walked around together, and yesterday they'd even held hands, Ethan speculated that someone might have spread a rumor based on that alone. Out of context, it might have been easy to misinterpret.

But if anyone had seen them during lunch today, they'd know it was baseless nonsense.

Because Hoyeon was clearly brimming with hostility toward Dogeon.

Ethan, having grown up in the underworld, could sense a faint killing intent—and this time, it was strong enough for even someone unfamiliar with danger to feel it.

Hoyeon, who'd teased Dogeon during class by playfully using her tail, suddenly vanished and then reappeared with open hostility.

Ethan found it suspicious but didn't think too much of it. After all, mages using dark magic were prone to extreme emotional instability.

He assumed her holding Dogeon's hand yesterday must have been due to such mental fluctuations.

Feeling foolish for having once thought to use Dogeon as leverage against Hoyeon, Ethan walked away.

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…Physical education or sanctioned torture?

I knew from the first day that our gym teacher was insane—asserting dominance from the start—but this? This was beyond my expectations.

To think I'd once naively considered him a mentor. Mentor, my foot—he was just a devil in disguise.

"Daniel, you're too slow!"

"Aaaaaargh!"

If it were just verbal abuse, I wouldn't call him a demon. Harsh gym teachers are a universal truth.

But behind the students running the course with all their might was a monstrous creature chasing them.

Though it wasn't real—just a mana-based illusion—it was convincing enough to terrify everyone.

The teacher's pre-run explanation cemented his status as a lunatic:

"Though these illusions, formed with mana, cannot injure you physically, they can cause pain. Don't even think about taking it easy."

Some students, already caught by the illusion, screamed like they were being dragged into hell.

"My arm, my arm…!"

"It hurts, it hurts! Please, save me!"

Dogeon was running at the front with a relaxed expression, but as the students fell further behind, their faces started to change drastically.

Daniel, a male student, was already ashen-faced, sprinting with all his might, while a petite girl with pink hair was crying as she ran.

"Waaaah~! Exipri, help meee~!"

So her name was Exipri. Despite being skilled in mana breathing techniques, her small stature left her nearly at the very back of the group.

As the students reached what seemed to be the final lap, some threw themselves over the finish line, while others were pitifully caught just inches from it by the illusions.

Thinking like this while others were giving their all might have been wrong, but…

This was entertaining. From my seat, predicting who would make it and who wouldn't had its own appeal.

Was this how Roman citizens felt watching gladiators fight for their lives in the Colosseum? Of course, no blood was being shed, and no one was dying here.

Not that I wished for that.

Originally, I came here to monitor Dogeon, but at some point, I found myself immersed in spectating this hellish P.E. class.

Dogeon seemed to be tired as well, refraining from mingling with others, which only made it easier for me to relax and watch.

“The monster that just chased you was a C-rank known as a Chaser. Its population has been rapidly increasing lately, causing harm to nearby villages,” the instructor began, addressing the students.

“These creatures are absurdly simple-minded. Once they target prey, they pursue it relentlessly. Imagine what would have happened to you if that had been real.”

To summarize his lengthy tirade in a single sentence:

I’ll make you strong enough to escape such monsters by the end of the semester.

…That’s what he was getting at.

If they offered tributes to the gods, they wouldn’t have to engage in such absurdity in the first place.

What a peculiar and strange continent this was.

…Well, since I’m here as a student, I should avoid overstepping.

Returning to my initial purpose, Dogeon still wasn’t doing anything notable. At one point, he glanced at me, acknowledging my presence.

“So, you do feel at least a little sorry, huh.”

For a moment, I doubted my friend, and it made me wonder if something was wrong with me.

The warm sunlight, combined with my comfortably full stomach, was making me drowsy. There was no way Dogeon would pull anything ridiculous now, so maybe I could take a short nap.

The chair was pleasantly soft, so I sank into it and closed my eyes. Surely, he wouldn't try flirting with someone while I was asleep.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 35

Chapter 35: Dream

Before me stood a younger version of myself, seated beside my mother in a mist-shrouded pavilion overlooking a serene lake. The two of them were engaged in conversation.

Ah, a dream.

I didn't feel a strong desire to wake up. After all, my best friend wasn't likely to betray me here, and even if it was just a dream, I could see my mother's face again.

Even though I could communicate with her through my diary, seeing her in person felt entirely different. The distance between us spurred me to walk closer to them.

Being a dream, I found I could walk on the water without any special effort. It felt odd, but then again, it was my dream—why not?

Sliding across the water as if skating was amusing, so I played around for a bit before eventually reaching the pavilion where my younger self and my mother were.

"My child, I want to ask you something. What do you think life is?"

"…What life… is?"

Her words were clear, yet young me stammered slightly in response, speaking neither fluently nor awkwardly—likely around thirteen years old,

or thereabouts.

It made sense. After all, I'd spent nearly four years rigorously correcting my speech. It had been tedious at the time, but looking back now, I understood that Father had taught me so diligently out of love.

…Still, I wouldn't want to return to those days. Repeating his words like a parrot and answering sudden, unexpected questions correctly—it had all been exhausting.

"Um…"

My mother had always posed difficult questions when we were alone.

Could humanity survive without gods? Was it right to sacrifice a few to save the many? Was aging truly part of a living being's natural order?

At first, I'd wracked my brain trying to come up with plausible answers, but at some point, I started escaping with a playful, Baby doesn't know that routine.

It wasn't that I disliked my mother—just the convoluted problems she posed. And it didn't help that I wasn't smart enough to provide the answers she sought.

But this particular question—what life is—I didn't recall her asking before. It felt too vivid to dismiss as just a dream.

"…Life is… something infinitely precious and, uh, valuable… isn't it?"

That was the best answer my younger self could muster. Such a generic response would never satisfy my mother.

Sure enough, she appeared unimpressed, mulling over my words.

"Infinitely precious and valuable, you say."

As she repeated the words, she gestured with her hand, and something began to take shape in midair.

It was a skeleton—unmistakably the frame of a fish. Bit by bit, veins, a heart, internal organs, muscles, and skin layered themselves onto the bones.

The fish was alive, moving on its own. With another wave of her hand, the fish, which had been suspended in the air, dropped into the water with a splash and disappeared.

“So, is the act of creating life with my gestures also something infinitely precious and valuable?”

“Uh…?”

Though I now know how remarkable my mother was, as a child, I hadn’t grasped that yet. Hence the dumbfounded expression on my younger self’s face.

Still, this scene felt oddly familiar, like I’d seen it somewhere before. It was too detailed for a dream.

…Ah, that’s right. This isn’t a dream—it’s a memory. For some reason, I’d forgotten it until now.

“Well, of course, Mother is precious too, but… uh, this is… kind of a different sort of preciousness… isn’t it?”

Young me looked pale, visibly overwhelmed. If the memory had been this impactful, how could I have forgotten it?

“You think so? Then let me ask you another question. What do you think humans are?”

“…Huh?”

My mother smiled playfully and raised her hand. The young me, already pushed beyond her limit, fainted on the spot.

“Perhaps I went too far. Very well—forget what happened today. When the time is right, you’ll remember.”

She cradled my unconscious self in her lap, stroking my hair gently. Witnessing this scene now, I understood. She must have erased the memory to protect me from trauma.

When she'd raised her hand just then, I'd genuinely thought she might create a human out of thin air, and the thought terrified me.

Even now, seeing something like that would be a shock. Just as I was trembling at the thought of what hadn't even happened, I felt something strange.

My mother was looking directly at me.

…What? How?

How could a memory of her be looking at me?

"…And you, my child, listening from over there. Why don't you consider it, too? What is a human?"

I froze, stunned, as my mother continued.

"Go on now. You must finish what you started, mustn't you?"

How did she know that? I tried to speak, but my body wouldn't move at all. What's more, what did she mean by finish monitoring Dogeon?

Nothing made sense. Yet I could unmistakably hear Dogeon's voice in my ears, calling out Exipri's name.

"Why do I have to take remedial lessons?!"

"A good question, cadet. The reason is simple: magical beasts don't spare women just because they're women. In fact," the instructor corrected himself with a wry grin, "they target women first. So you'll need to work twice as hard, won't you?"

Exipri desperately tried to escape the remedial class, but Georg, as if oblivious to her protests, firmly placed her in the extra session.

Not that the remedial group was large—it was just me and her. And since I was here for magic training, we barely had any overlap.

“Don’t take it too hard, Lady Exipri. I’m sure the professor has your best interests in mind.”

Of course, he didn’t. Honestly, just handing her some snacks would’ve improved her mood exponentially—there was no need for all this.

Still, something was better than nothing.

With Hoyeon asleep, there was no need to worry about any sharp stares either.

It seemed like the idea of not having friends was a sore spot for Exipri. After I’d made that remark earlier, she hadn’t uttered a single word.

I debated whether to apologize, feeling guilty that she might truly be upset. But approaching someone when they’re angry can often backfire, so I held back.

She struck me as someone who was both easy to handle and, at times, a bit of a handful—likely the type to sulk all over again if she saw me mingling with others.

After all, if she’d followed me all the way to the gym, it was probably because she was mad at me yet didn’t want to be apart—or worse, didn’t want me talking to anyone else.

I couldn’t know for sure until she told me herself.

“Ugh… I guess so…?”

“Yes, of course.”

All it took was a little bit of reassurance, and she brightened up instantly. Seeing her reaction, I couldn’t help but think she was much easier to deal with than Hoyeon.

Hoyeon wasn't exactly difficult either—at least not when the word friend was involved. I guess having no friends at all until now made her value that word so deeply.

Thinking about it, it made sense why she'd been so elated to hear it, and why she'd gotten so upset when I trampled on it. It was understandable.

I'd stayed in touch with my first friend, even after falling into this world.

Once her anger cooled down, I'd make sure to sincerely apologize.

Meanwhile, after a bit of banter with Exipri, she quickly cheered up and started giving it her all in the training, declaring she'd overcome this challenge. Her determination was, frankly, adorable.

Today's lesson wasn't in a pocket dimension, just regular training in the gym.

She darted back and forth, dodging illusions of beasts, while I focused on countering Georg's magic. Overall, the session was straightforward.

The main class earlier had been grueling, so I'd feared the remedial session would be worse. Surprisingly, it was manageable.

The spells he cast were basic enough to block with simple barriers or counter with opposing magic.

I figured today's session was more about gauging our proficiency than anything else, like the assessments during the first class.

While cruising through the lesson, I suddenly felt an intense gaze boring into the back of my head. Turning cautiously, I saw Hoyeon staring at me.

…Since when?

If she'd just woken up, she wouldn't be glaring at me so intently. Which meant she'd seen me interacting with Exipri.

The question was, how much had she witnessed?

If she'd been watching since the moment I first called Exipri by name, my crime was much greater.

So, she really did follow me because she couldn't stand the idea of me talking to anyone else.

Lost in thought, I got hit by one of Georg's spells.

"Where are you looking, Cadet Han Dogeon?"

"Apologies, sir."

It felt like getting flicked on the forehead, only harder, leaving a stinging sensation.

There was no arguing with Georg—whatever he decided was final. Life at the academy felt like one long exercise in submission.

"Ah, so it's that girl over there, isn't it?"

"How did you…?"

Before I could ask, Georg carried on as if it were obvious.

"Go on. She's waiting for you. That's all for today."

This wasn't like him at all. A man who considered everyone but himself to be garbage, paying attention to someone else? Unbelievable.

Still, that was beside the point…

Right now, I had to go and apologize to the very angry Hoyeon.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 36

Chapter 36: Crime and Punishment

We possess powers so incomprehensible that we can't even perceive them.

When imbued with human will, this power becomes mana. If imbued with the will of gods, it transforms into divine energy, and with the will of demons, it becomes miasma.

But what would happen if humanity could wield this unknown power as it is?

This was a question that Georg had pondered tirelessly, both before and after joining the Hero's Party.

The catastrophic battle against the Demon King had left his magic circuits and mana circle completely destroyed, ensuring he would never find the answer. Yet, Georg harbored no regrets.

Even with his circuits and circle shattered, he could still use magic artifacts.

More importantly, without his contributions, the Hero's Party would never have even approached the demons who called themselves gods. In that, he took pride.

Before Georg's arrival, the Hero's Party had no definitive countermeasure against miasma.

There were limits to what divine energy could suppress. Even the prayers of the Saintess proved ineffective.

Their only strategy was for the Saintess and the warrior to hold off the lesser demons, while the Hero, blessed by the divine sword and the goddess, struck down the demon before succumbing to the miasma.

Even that tactic failed against the most powerful demons. They could only defeat weaker demons and demon-possessed beings.

Although these victories were somewhat helpful, they were far from enough to turn the tide.

Just as even the Hero began to lose hope, Georg joined the party, bringing with him a formula that converted miasma into mana and divine energy.

The formula was so intricate and specialized that it could only be etched onto Georg's body. However, that alone was sufficient to reverse their dire situation.

His circuits deteriorated further as a result, but Georg deemed it a small price to pay, especially since the Hero, whom he considered superior in every way, had apologized to him. Saving humanity was worth the cost, he thought.

Georg looked toward the stands. A young girl cloaked in a black aura stood there.

When he first encountered her, he had assumed she was a potential enemy due to her use of miasma.

Now, she appeared to be the answer to a question he had believed would remain forever unanswered.

She was manipulating something that was neither miasma nor mana.

Watching her, Georg felt an academic curiosity reignite within him—a passion he had long forgotten.

What was this power? How did she wield it? What could it achieve?

The fact that she was a user of miasma no longer mattered.

He was confident that he could subdue her if necessary. After all, he had hunted tens of thousands of demon-possessed beings.

Georg resolved to uncover the truth, even if it meant incapacitating and dissecting her alive.

Of course, he preferred to resolve things peacefully.

By now, he had entirely forgotten about tutoring Han Dogeon.

When Georg noticed Dogeon's attention fixated on her, he promptly launched a spell at the boy.

"Where do you think you're looking, Cadet Han Dogeon?"

"I apologize."

The girl's murderous glare directed at the boy was of no concern to him. His interest lay solely in the black aura enveloping her.

"Ah, so it's because of that female student over there, isn't it?"

"How did you—"

"Go to her. She's waiting for you. That's all for today."

Georg wanted Dogeon to approach her as quickly as possible. That way, he could also observe her up close without raising suspicion.

If questioned about his proximity, he could always claim it was to prevent any escalating lovers' quarrels. That would be a sufficiently convincing excuse.

As soon as Dogeon moved toward her, Georg immediately turned his attention to Baek Hoyeon.

***

For some reason, Professor Georg was following me.

He had never been particularly approachable, but now his expression seemed even more severe, bordering on menacing. His faint smile was

eerie, sending chills down my spine.

An outstanding magician but a wholly broken human being, he was deeply unsettling.

After all, there was that scene in the original story where he dissected demon-possessed beings alive.

…She wasn't using miasma, so surely, he wouldn't hurt her, right? Trying to comprehend the actions of such a deranged individual was futile, so I decided to ignore him.

What I needed to focus on was calming Hoyeon before things spiraled out of control.

Her aura was intermittently flickering with dark energy, and the betrayal and rage in her gaze were palpable.

The closer I got, the more it felt like stepping into a tiger's den. A primal fear gripped me, warning me that I might not walk away unscathed.

Even though I knew logically that Hoyeon wouldn't hurt me, my instincts screamed at me to run.

"…Hoyeon."

After much deliberation, I decided to start by calling her name and apologizing.

"Kneel."

But the girl before me wasn't just my friend, Baek Hoyeon.

She was Baek Hoyeon, daughter of Baek Jeongho and Byeolbi, and the sole heir to the Baek Empire.

Her tone and demeanor weren't merely regal—they exuded the authority and confidence of someone who had always been destined to command.

Before I could think, my body obeyed her command.

“Do you know your crime?”

Only then did regret flood over me. I had underestimated her. I had been foolish enough to think that calling her a friend would be enough.

…I hadn’t known she could be like this.

Her mere gaze felt crushing, as if even breathing were an impossible feat.

“I… I have committed an unforgivable sin. Please… grant me your mercy…”

The thought of meeting her eyes never even crossed my mind. My only option was to bow my head and plead for forgiveness.

The fate of humanity or the events of the second act didn’t matter anymore. The fear of imminent death overwhelmed everything else.

Pressing my forehead to the ground, I strained my ears to detect her reaction.

“…Then confess your sins.”

Time, which had felt eternal, passed, and her voice, now slightly less furious, reached my ears.

There was hope—a baseless, fleeting hope—that she might forgive me.

After all, I was her first friend. Surely she wouldn’t hate me that much.

“I diverted my attention to another girl in your presence, upset you, and failed to apologize properly.”

I struggled to come up with more, but that was all I could manage. Having laid bare what I assumed were all her grievances, I cautiously looked up at her.

Her anger hadn't disappeared, but it had subsided significantly.

Moments ago, her aura had been so oppressive that it made my skin sting.

The malicious intent that had filled her gaze was now gone.

"…You do understand your wrongdoing."

I chose to remain silent and await her judgment. Pleading for forgiveness prematurely might provoke another outburst.

"…Do not come near me for a while."

How long is "a while"? And does this mean I'm forgiven?

I wanted to ask, but the words wouldn't come out. All I could do was watch her leave, feeling hollow.

…This is a disaster, isn't it?

"Ahhh, all done! Professor… huh? Where's Professor Georg? Did he leave Exipri behind?"

Exipri's voice rang out, signaling that she had completed her course.

I wished I could blame her for all this, but it was entirely my fault. Blaming her would be unfair.

What was clear was that I needed to regain Hoyeon's trust.

But I had no idea how. Trying to approach her as a friend might backfire, and I didn't even know what she liked.

For someone who called themselves her friend, not knowing what she liked was inexcusable.

I set aside my self-recrimination and focused on finding a way.

She probably couldn't communicate with her parents in real-time, and she had been somewhat lenient with me in the past. That gave me a sliver of hope.

Think. What can I do to win her over?

…Oh, right. In the original story, felines and beastfolk couldn't resist bones.

Since tigers are part of the feline family…

Maybe it could work?

***

As I left the gymnasium, I briefly thought that I might have overreacted. But the memory of him fawning over Exipri made my anger flare up again.

I knew Dogeon couldn't possibly dedicate his life to just looking at me, but still, I hated seeing him act like that.

Seriously, how long has it even been since he messed up? And now, his attention is already on another girl?

So, girls come before friends now, huh?

…Is this just the tragic nature of men? In the end, is friendship doomed to lose against lust?

Even one of my old friends stopped reaching out as soon as they started dating someone. I knew this in my head, but…

It still hurts.

Is it really so hard for someone to focus on me and me alone?

I guess it is. He's an "insider," after all. To someone like him, sticking with just one person for too long is probably tedious.

He probably swaps out the girls around him as soon as they get bored.

So how much more disposable must a friend be?

Feeling gloomy, I headed straight back to the dorm.

The faintly encoded gibberish here puzzled me for a moment. I decided to ignore it and focus.

I opened my journal to write about what happened today but stopped midway. I wasn't ready to leave the academy yet.

After all, no matter what he thought of me, he was still my only friend.

…But for the next two days, I won't say a single word to him.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 37

Chapter 38: Unbreakable Bonds

There were always those who claimed there was a difference between loneliness and solitude.

They would say loneliness was harmful, while solitude was beneficial.

These self-proclaimed sages would go on about how being alone was vital for a healthy life.

But they didn't truly understand what it meant to be isolated.

They didn't know the terror of realizing that, one day, you could disappear without anyone noticing, or the despair of knowing tomorrow would be no different from today.

They didn't understand the feelings of a wooden plank drifting aimlessly, waiting to sink as water slowly eroded it.

That's why I hated being alone.

That's why I… just couldn't bear it.

It had been a day since I lashed out at Dogeon.

I'd been deliberately avoiding him because I didn't want to seem too easy, but honestly, I was close to caving in.

Even food had lost its flavor, and I could barely stomach my meals. The air itself felt heavier and more suffocating than usual.

No, maybe it wasn't the air—it was me.

I managed to hold out for a few hours without glancing in his direction, but eventually, I had to admit the truth to myself.

I didn't want to go back to being alone.

It was purely hypothetical, but what if, during the time I avoided him, he found another girl to charm?

If it happened once, there was nothing stopping it from happening again.

The thought alone made me restless. I couldn't bear the anxiety.

So I started straining to eavesdrop whenever he talked to someone, watching him with sharp eyes to see where he went and who he met.

I hated myself for acting this way. It was pathetic.

Yet, within an hour of swearing to stop caring, I was already looking for him.

Thankfully, he wasn't talking to any girls this time. But even watching him talk to another guy annoyed me.

I knew it was irrational, and yet I couldn't help myself. He was the only person I could truly call my friend.

Even if, to him, I was just one among many friends.

When I snapped back to my senses, I realized my journal was filled with nothing but thoughts about Dogeon. At this point, I couldn't even call it a proper journal anymore.

Then again, considering I spent the whole day keeping tabs on him, calling it a journal wasn't inaccurate either.

Still, it wasn't something I'd want to show my mother. I preferred to write that I was doing just fine, even in this strange land with its warped ley lines and odd air.

I had plenty of time to rewrite it anyway; Mother was likely busy with state affairs.

While I normally used ink, today I found myself using a pencil. Pencils were surprisingly nice.

But what could I write? If I omitted everything about Dogeon, there'd be nothing left to say.

"Attended class and ate meals." That would sum up my day in one boring sentence.

I wondered if I should just write fiction instead.

But I didn't want to write lies either.

It wasn't lying to call him out for being in heat—that was just withholding certain truths.

Yet, fabricating a story out of whole cloth? That was different. The slightly frayed triangle in my heart told me not to do it.

So, I decided not to write anything.

Mother hadn't seemed too upset the last time I skipped a day, and this was hardly worth breaking my own resolve over.

Besides, if I wrote about how I'd spent the day chasing after some boy, it'd only irritate Father.

I brushed off the pencil shavings and closed the journal.

An overwhelming sense of emptiness washed over me. It was a profound boredom I hadn't felt in a long time.

Life at the academy wasn't particularly exciting, I realized.

And yet, it was ridiculous how dull it felt just because one person wasn't by my side.

Though I'd vowed to give him the silent treatment for two days, I wasn't sure I could last.

After all, I hadn't made the promise to anyone else. Breaking it wouldn't really matter, would it?

Yes, that's right.

A single day of punishment was more than enough. In fact, sticking close to him would be a far heavier punishment for him than for me.

If someone who'd scolded me stayed glued to my side, I'd probably be on edge the whole time.

And tomorrow was the academy's first weekend, so I planned to spend the day tailing him closely, meddling with his every move.

After everything, there was no way he'd dare look at another girl.

***

Yesterday, I spent the entire day gathering information and discovered that this world had a plant similar to catnip.

An academy-adjacent pet shop sold it, which was frequented by noblewomen.

The noblewomen part wasn't particularly important—what mattered was that I could buy it for her.

However, one thing bothered me:

Would it be okay to give something from a pet shop to someone like her?

Presenting a princess with an item meant for animals sounded crazy, but as long as I didn't disclose where I got it, it should be fine.

If she asked, I could always say I foraged it from the forest.

As I mulled over how to appease her, I remembered my original weekend plans: visiting the bakery with Exipri, sparring with Anastasia, and meeting Gloria at the academy chapel.

None of those would be happening.

This weekend was entirely dedicated to making up with Hoyeon. She deserved it, even if it meant postponing everything else.

Once I stepped outside to buy the gift, though, I ran into Hoyeon herself. That wasn't part of the plan.

I'd avoided her all day yesterday, so I'd assumed she'd stay out of sight today as well. Clearly, I was wrong.

"…"

Her tail swayed slightly, but she didn't say anything.

Hoping I was mistaken, I walked past her in silence, but she naturally fell into step beside me.

…Was going to a pet shop really the right move? Still, I couldn't think of another way to lift her mood.

Even if I asked her what she liked, I doubted she'd tell me.

Feeling uneasy, I carried on. As we approached the pet shop, Hoyeon remained quiet, though her tail continued its gentle swaying.

It was strange. Her tail movements usually meant she was in a good mood, but her expression was still tense. I couldn't read her at all.

The shop was much larger than I'd expected. I had assumed it would be a small store tucked into a corner, but it occupied an entire building.

Hoyeon tilted her head in curiosity.

"K.C.'s Pet… Supplies? A pet shop? Why are we here?"

She finally broke her silence, her curiosity overriding her previous restraint. I couldn't be entirely truthful, so I improvised.

"I was thinking of buying some food for stray cats."

For some reason, that explanation didn't sit well with her. She frowned slightly.

"I didn't expect you to have such interests… That's not ideal. Wild things are most beautiful when left as they are."

"Oh… I see. Then what about keeping one as a pet?"

"Taking responsibility for it is commendable, but are pets allowed in the dormitory?"

"Yes. As long as their waste is properly managed, the rules permit it."

So, she doesn't like cats. Strange, considering she's part feline herself.

That didn't change my plans, though. I wasn't actually planning to keep a cat, but this gave me an excuse to buy the catnip along with the other supplies.

"Very well. If you're taking it in, I won't object. But don't abandon it later."

"Of course. I won't let that happen."

Satisfied, she smiled as we entered the store.

The rumors were true—elegantly dressed noblewomen were inside, showing off their pets.

I even overheard mentions of baby dragons and drakes, though I chose to ignore those.

While picking up litter, a tray, deodorizer, and food, I loitered near the catnip display, waiting for Hoyeon to get distracted.

When she finally seemed bored or drowsy, I slipped a bag of catnip into my basket.

“Yes, I’ve got everything I need.”

“…Oh? Already? Then let’s go.”

She only noticed after a moment, as if snapping out of a daze. It seemed she hadn’t caught on.

Was she tired from following me around all morning? Either way, it didn’t matter. My plan was proceeding smoothly.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 38

Chapter 38: Not Drugs (Really)

If Dogeon had been going to meet another girl, I'd already been prepared to kick his knees out from under him. Thankfully, that wasn't the case.

Instead, we arrived at a rather strange shop.

The sign's lettering was crude and unique, making it hard to decipher, but I managed to read it after some effort.

"K.C.'s Pet… Supplies? A pet shop? Why are we here?"

This guy didn't even have a pet—why suddenly a trip to a pet store? Unable to hold back my curiosity, I asked him directly.

"I thought I'd buy some food for stray cats," he replied.

…Han Dogeon, you. Are you serious? A cat daddy? My expression twisted at the mention of feeding stray cats.

Sure, in a way, I might resemble a cat, but I've never liked them, neither in this life nor the last.

In my past life, it was allergies and the caterwauling during mating season. In this life, it was from actually raising one.

Cats didn't have the loyalty or playful charm of dogs—they acted like they were my equal and constantly tested my patience.

They'd behave around my father but go wild specifically when dealing with me, which made it all the more irritating.

"I didn't think you were into that sort of thing… but it's not ideal. Wild animals are best left in the wild," I said.

Not being family, I couldn’t outright forbid him, so I couched my words carefully, implying it wasn’t the best idea.

Feeding strays disrupts the ecosystem, after all. Cats multiply, eat birds, the bird population declines, and insects proliferate.

Though in truth, I just didn’t want cats being a nuisance in my vicinity.

“Oh, I see. Then what if I kept one as a pet?” he asked, shifting from feeding strays to actually owning one.

If he liked cats that much, I couldn’t argue. His resolve seemed firm.

“Taking responsibility is admirable, but are pets even allowed in the dorms?” I pressed, hoping he’d reconsider. Unspayed cats were noisy enough to make anyone lose their mind.

“Yes, the rules say as long as their waste is properly managed, it’s fine.”

It seemed Dogeon didn’t care about my opinion. He’d even checked the regulations in advance.

Well, I couldn’t stop him.

“Then do as you wish. If you’re taking one in, I won’t object, but don’t even think of abandoning it later.”

If you must abandon it, do it somewhere far, far away.

“Don’t worry. That won’t happen,” he said with conviction.

So, he wasn’t just a cat daddy—he was a full-blown cat lover.

I gave up trying to talk him out of it and focused on my original goal: watching Dogeon to make sure he didn’t get into any trouble.

Most of the people here were older women or elderly folks, but I couldn’t let my guard down.

You never know—Dogeon could have some strange taste for older women. A friend of mine didn't look the type, but he had a thing for NTR.

Or maybe Dogeon just didn't discriminate, whether young or old.

Still, as long as I was here, nothing like that was going to happen.

The pet shop was enormous for what it was. Judging by snippets of conversation, I gathered that some people kept massive magical beasts as pets.

Certainly, you wouldn't need such large, sturdy cages for ordinary dogs or cats.

As I glanced at the curious items on display, I also kept an eye on Dogeon. He seemed genuinely focused on buying things for a cat.

Then, suddenly, an alluring, intoxicating scent hit me.

For a moment, I forgot what I was doing. It was similar to the hazy feeling that overtook me during mating season in my past life.

Where was it coming from?

…Ah, over there. The display Dogeon had been circling for some time now. I wasn't curious why he'd been lingering—it didn't matter.

I just wanted to get closer to that scent.

Just a little more.

"…I've bought everything I needed," Dogeon said.

His voice snapped me out of it just before I could dive toward the display.

"Huh? Oh… You're done already? Then let's go."

That was close—doing something like that in a crowded place would've been a disaster.

I didn’t want to know what it was. Just recalling the scent might consume me again.

Focus on Dogeon. Yes, Dogeon.

There was no way he’d been ogling other girls while I was momentarily out of it.

He’d been solely focused on cat-related items, and he hadn’t paid any attention to the people around us.

For some reason, that brought me a sense of relief as we headed back to the dorms.

The familiarity I felt toward him suddenly made sense.

Dogeon reminded me of the head of my royal guard.

Their looks, overall vibe, and friendly personalities were very similar.

…Though, sorry to my guard captain, but Dogeon’s appearance was a little better.

However, the guard captain never displayed the thoughtlessness that Dogeon sometimes did, and he’d been with me since birth, which made him far more dependable.

Not in a romantic way, of course—I liked both of them simply as people.

For some reason, Mother seemed to think I had feelings for Dogeon as a woman, but I’d resolve that misunderstanding someday.

Even though I’d been shadowing him, I couldn’t follow him into his room. So, unless he did something noteworthy, I decided to read a book.

The day I got angry, I’d gone to the library to cool off and ended up borrowing an entire series.

The story was wild—at one point, the protagonist literally traveled to the moon—but I loved it.

I was just starting to immerse myself in it when someone knocked on my door.

"…Are you there?"

It was Dogeon's voice. Reluctantly, I bookmarked the page and opened the door.

Immediately, a strong, familiar scent filled the air. It was far more potent than what I'd smelled at the shop.

The source was a small leather pouch in Dogeon's hand. I reached for it instinctively before regaining my composure.

"To… apologize for what happened two days ago, I prepared a small gift," he said hesitantly.

I barely registered his words.

"Come in," I said.

Suppressing the urge to grab him, I focused all my attention on the pouch.

"What?"

"I said, come in."

Now.

Every second he hesitated felt agonizingly long.

As soon as he entered, I shut the door behind him. I wasn't sure what my expression looked like, but it definitely wasn't something I wanted anyone else to see.

"Hoyeon? Why'd you close the door?"

I advanced toward him slowly, and he backed away.

It didn't matter. All I wanted was to bury my nose in that leather pouch. Nothing else crossed my mind.

"Give me your hand," I demanded.

"My… hand?"

"The other one."

The one holding the pouch. Why was he offering his empty hand?

When he finally extended the pouch, I grabbed it with both hands. He flinched slightly, but I didn't care.

I pressed my face against the pouch, inhaling deeply. Dogeon called my name over and over, but I didn't hear him.

Each breath felt like fireworks of euphoria exploding in my mind. Even with my eyes closed, vibrant, unfamiliar colors danced before me.

"Ssss… Haaaaa…"

I felt my knees buckle, and I ended up leaning on him for support.

I didn't care how pathetic I looked—I just wanted more.

Please, just let me stay like this. I don't care what this is. Just keep it coming.

"Hoyeon! Hoyeon! Are you okay?!"

I looked up at him with unfocused eyes. He was staring at me with a concerned expression.

Oh… He'd called my name so many times, but I'd been too entranced to respond.

I suppose it'd be alarming if your only friend suddenly buried their face in your hand like this.

Mmm… My head felt so light. I probably couldn't even stand on my own right now.

"…I'm fine. Just… feeling good…"

I tried to speak clearly, but my words came out slurred.

Hmm, was this like alcohol? My speech was slurred, my balance was off, and I felt amazing.

So, was I drunk? I'd never had a sip of alcohol in my life, yet here I was, intoxicated by some mysterious means. It was a bit embarrassing.

But it was Dogeon, so I didn't mind. I could trust him.

"You're… feeling good?" he asked hesitantly.

"…Yeah."

I nodded, rubbing my face against the pouch. Since it was small, it might've looked like I was nuzzling his hand.

"So… you like it, then?"

Like it?

"…Love it…"

If possible, I want this every day.

Before bed, or on days when I couldn't follow Dogeon around, this would be perfect to stave off boredom.

Melancholy? I'd drown it in waves of euphoria.

Yet, for some reason, Dogeon didn't seem to share my joy.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 39

Chapter 39: Drunken Confessions

When she suddenly closed the door and stared at me, I honestly thought I was about to get eaten alive.

Her gaze was that of a predator eyeing its prey. Even though I knew she wouldn't actually harm me, my body froze instinctively.

That fear lingered until she buried her nose in my hand and began rubbing her head against it.

Realizing she was after the catnip and not me, I sighed in relief. But that relief didn't last long once I noticed she wasn't responding to her name at all.

The effect was… incredible.

Actually, scratch that—it was too much. For a moment, I wondered if something was seriously wrong with her.

"Hoyeon! Hoyeon! What's wrong?! Are you okay?!"

My intention had been to cheer her up and earn her forgiveness—not to leave her in this state.

She ignored me completely, still nuzzling my hand, oblivious to her surroundings.

I couldn't touch her carelessly, so all I could do was call her name and pray she'd snap out of it.

Eventually, she did respond, though her condition was worse than I expected.

Her eyes were glazed over, her cheeks flushed deep red, and her breathing was erratic. She wobbled as though she couldn't stand on her own.

No matter how you looked at it, she wasn't fine.

"…I'm fine. Just… feels good…"

Even her speech was slurred. This wasn't what I had in mind when I got the catnip for her.

I'd only expected effects similar to alcohol, as described in the original story. I'd given it to her lightly, thinking it would just lift her spirits a little.

Instead, it felt like I'd handed her some sort of drug. I'd never seen drugs in real life, but this had to be close.

How was I supposed to handle this?

She'd recover naturally over time, but I had no idea whether this stuff was addictive.

And since I didn't fully understand how catnip worked on feline beastfolk, there wasn't much I could do right now.

…What's done is done. If I couldn't undo it, I could at least make the most of the situation.

"You feel good?" I asked cautiously.

"…Yeah."

Her response came slower than usual. In this state, I could probably do anything, and she'd just giggle and go along with it.

But I had no intention of doing anything inappropriate.

In fact, I'd push her away if she tried anything. This wasn't her genuine will—it was the influence of the catnip.

If it had been her choice, that'd be one thing, but this? This was on me, and I couldn't take advantage of it.

"Then… can I take that to mean you like it?"

"Yeah… more…"

I decided to stick to getting verbal confirmation from her. Knowing her personality, she'd honor her word, even if she wasn't in her right mind when she gave it.

"Then… Hoyeon."

"Mm…?"

It was hard to believe this dazed girl, swaying in front of me, was the same person who held humanity's future in her hands.

Regardless of appearances, she was crucial. The problem was, she seemed to be blocking the path to our goal instead of helping us reach it.

"That time during PE, why were you so angry?"

I had a pretty good idea, but I wanted to confirm. Guesswork wasn't going to cut it.

Hoyeon blinked slowly, meeting my gaze, and then spoke sluggishly.

"…You… talked to another girl… If you date another girl… you'll abandon me…"

So that was it. As I feared, her attachment was intense—maybe even obsessive. She seemed deeply afraid of losing her only friend.

"You don't have to worry about that. Even if I date someone else, I'd never neglect you. I promise."

If her fear was abandonment, I just had to assure her I'd stay.

“Don’t… lie.”

…What?

That wasn’t the reaction I expected. Startled, I looked down at her.

She’d stopped nuzzling my hand and was now staring directly at me.

Her eyes were still unfocused and dull, but somehow, I could feel her piercing gaze.

“You say that… but you’ll just look at other girls again…”

“That’s… why I hate it. I want you to only look… at me…”

Before she could finish her sentence, she collapsed onto the floor. But I already understood what she was trying to say.

She wanted me to look only at her.

…This was more serious than I’d thought. Both her attachment and her reaction to the catnip.

I knelt to check her condition, ready to carry her to the infirmary if needed, but she was just deeply asleep.

Relieved, I carefully lifted her onto the bed.

My original plan had been to take her around the academy after making amends, but that was clearly impossible now.

Even though there didn’t seem to be any immediate harm, I couldn’t leave in case something happened when she woke up.

For now, I needed to deal with the catnip.

This stuff wasn’t going anywhere near her again.

After tossing it out the window and washing my hands, I decided to wait by her bedside until she woke up.

With nothing else to do, I began idly exploring her room. A peculiar book on her desk caught my attention.

Unlike the others strewn about, this one had no title and a strange texture to its cover.

For a moment, I hesitated. If it was her diary, reading it would be a huge invasion of privacy.

But she showed no signs of waking, and her secrets might help guide us toward a happy ending. Guiltily, I opened it.

On the left side of each page was what I assumed to be her handwriting. On the right were unfamiliar symbols I couldn't decipher.

I flipped through without much luck until I came to a blank page.

Just as I was about to close the book, words began appearing on the right side.

That alone was shocking, but what left me speechless was that I could read them.

—Hello there, child.

The words were in Hangul.

***

I woke with a pounding headache, like I'd just had a bad dream.

"Ugh…"

I vaguely remembered following Dogeon to a pet shop and then returning to the dorms…

But everything after that was a blur. I wasn't even tired—why had I been asleep?

Looking around, I saw Dogeon sitting nearby, pale as a ghost.

…What was he doing in my room?

"You. Why are you here…?"

"Huh? Why am I here?"

Why was he answering my question with another question? He seemed genuinely confused.

"Did you forget what happened?" he asked.

I had no idea what he was talking about. I'd just woken up—what could I have forgotten?

Wait…

"…You didn't do anything weird, did you?!"

Like touching me while I slept!

He was the protagonist of a harem story, after all. It wouldn't be surprising—actually, it would be completely in character. First, I had to figure out what he'd done.

Realizing what I was implying, Dogeon frantically denied it.

"…I swear, I'd never do that. We're friends. Why would I?"

"Right…?"

Yeah, we were friends. He wouldn't do something like that. I must've just woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

With that settled, my next question was obvious.

“…Then how’d you get into my room?”

Dogon hesitated for a moment, making me anxious, but finally answered.

“The door… was open.”

The door was open?

I was about to accuse him of lying when I remembered something: I’d opened his locker and room door before.

Oh, right. There weren’t any locks here.

So, it wasn’t Dogeon’s fault—it was the academy’s for not providing proper locks despite the tuition they charged.

I’d almost blamed my only friend.

…Well, my only sometimes-dense friend.

Sure, he sometimes ogled other girls or acted overly friendly with strangers, but he was still my friend.

The clock said it was nearly lunchtime, so it seemed Dogeon had come to wake me up to eat, just as I’d done for him before.

With the thin walls, he’d probably heard me sleeping. I didn’t snore, but my sleep habits were far from quiet.

“Alright, let’s go get lunch.”

“Lunch…?”

“…Wasn’t that why you came?”

Why was he acting so weird? He looked like someone who’d just had the life drained out of them.

“Oh, right. Let’s go eat.”

Something was definitely off about him. I wanted to ask, but he'd already left the room.

Whatever. It probably wasn't a big deal. I brushed off the odd feeling and followed him with a light step.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 40

Chapter 40: A Three-Way Encounter

□□□'s earliest memory was an empty void.

If □□□ could feel temperature, it might have been a hellish place where half their body burned while the other half froze. Yet, □□□ remained unscathed.

Why am I here? Who am I?

Such questions never occurred to □□□. Intelligence and self-awareness were unnecessary for an observer.

However, □□□ knew its mission:

"Observe civilizations and record the significance of life as they define it."

With this directive engraved into its very being, □□□ set out for the first star system in its database.

***

"—Greetings, child."

When those words appeared on the page, I froze as if I'd turned to stone.

It was more shocking than the time my father revealed an embarrassing childhood story at a family gathering.

Did the words appear automatically when the page was opened? But why were they in Hangul? Hangul didn't even exist in this world—how could this be?

Questions cascaded one after another, but I didn't have the luxury of pondering them in peace.

Another sentence materialized almost immediately.

"I've heard much about you from Hoyeon. I would like to have a brief conversation with you. Would that be alright?"

"…Who are you?"

Though I didn't expect a reply, I couldn't help but ask.

Who was I even talking to?

The idea that someone else might have been pulled into this world—a fellow Korean, no less—was ludicrous, but for a fleeting moment, I entertained it.

I was that desperate for clarity.

To my astonishment, the book responded again:

"I am the mother of Baek Hoyeon. You just lulled to sleep. You may know me better as Onbyeolbi. Call me what you prefer. Let us converse in writing so as not to wake my daughter."

The moment I read those words, the pieces clicked into place.

Ah. Onbyeolbi.

Had it been anyone else, I would've doubted them. But her? I believed it instantly.

Knowing the divine powers she displayed during the final confrontation in the original story, it made sense that she could do something like this.

That said, wasn't the continent supposed to be cloaked in divine energy, rendering her unobservable? Maybe she could bypass that if she really wanted to.

…Seriously, how were we ever supposed to beat her?

“Understood. But why do you wish to speak with me?”

She seemed oddly friendly, so I decided to play along and see where this went.

Trying to extract information from her was out of the question.

One wrong word, and it wouldn’t be an army but a mountain range flying toward the academy.

“As a mother, do I need a reason to converse with the boy who has piqued my daughter’s interest?”

“I see.”

That was a stupid question on my part. Without being able to see her face, my anxiety grew. If I made a mistake, I wouldn’t even realize it.

“Then let me ask you this first: What do you think of my daughter?”

About Hoyeon?

Honestly, I saw her as a sort of one-person escape pod—a last-ditch option if everything went wrong.

Primarily, she was a pivotal character whose very presence could disrupt the story.

By mitigating her influence, I hoped to stabilize the narrative and, if I was lucky, bypass the second act’s invasion event altogether.

Of course, there was no guarantee that would lead to a happy ending. The author never stated that avoiding the invasion was the key to victory.

All I had was vague information: “Conquer all the heroines to reach a happy ending.”

With only my knowledge of the original work and a somewhat capable body to rely on, I lacked confidence in my success.

That's why I considered Hoyeon an escape hatch.

…But there was no way I could admit that to Byeolbi.

"She's the first and only friend I've made since arriving at the academy. She's very dear to me."

I crafted a plausible answer instead.

"A friend, is it? My daughter said something similar. Then, what do you think of her as a woman?"

Thankfully, it seemed she couldn't read my mind. Or perhaps she could but chose to overlook it, given her knowledge of Hangul.

Still, her next question made me freeze.

As a woman?

What was she implying?

"I understand you committed quite the audacious act with her locker. If only her father had been as bold."

…So she'd been watching. I sighed deeply.

"How were you able to see that? Even with the divine energy enveloping the continent?"

I had no way of preventing her from observing me, but I still wanted to know. Not that it would save me from getting pummeled by Jeongho later.

"There's a convenient medium lying next to you. I can observe what happens around my daughter. It's amusing how easily you speak such shameless words under the guise of friendship."

So she had been watching through Hoyeon. One mystery solved.

“Is this her diary, then?”

“It is.”

…Fantastic. As if I hadn’t already crossed enough lines, I’d opened Pandora’s box without realizing it.

“May I humbly request a merciful end from her father?”

I had assumed Hoyeon could only communicate with her parents via letters. I hadn’t expected a diary that allowed real-time two-way communication.

And to make matters worse, Byeolbi had been monitoring her constantly.

I couldn’t help but laugh bitterly at my misfortune.

“Rest assured, child. He knows nothing of this.”

If Jeongho was unaware, then at least the army wouldn’t be coming for me anytime soon.

My relief was short-lived, as I realized I’d inevitably have to meet him someday.

Jeongho cherished those he considered his own, so his daughter’s first friend—or worse, potential suitor—was guaranteed to be summoned.

And when that day came, if I couldn’t impress him, my fate was sealed.

“Moreover, whatever you do to Hoyeon, as long as it doesn’t harm her life, I will not interfere.”

…Excuse me?

“Don’t you care for your daughter?”

I couldn’t stop myself from asking. Up until now, she seemed like a doting mother. Why the sudden hands-off approach?

“Of course I care. If she asked, I would destroy the world for her. But I do not wish for her decisions to be influenced by me.”

Decisions? What was she talking about? I had a sinking feeling that I shouldn’t ask.

“When she has seen the world and reached her conclusion, I will decide how to proceed. I trust you understand the implications. Act wisely.”

That was less permission to do as I pleased and more a thinly veiled threat. I didn’t need to ask what she meant by “decide.”

The future of this world—and humanity—was likely at stake.

Nothing more appeared after that, so I quietly closed the diary and returned it to its place.

Let’s review:

1. Hoyeon has a direct line of communication with her parents.

1. Her mother monitors her constantly.

1. If Hoyeon wills it, this world could literally be destroyed.

Could I really handle this? My confidence was crumbling fast.

“…Ugh.”

Unfortunately, Hoyeon chose that moment to wake up.

I wasn't ready to deal with her or the knowledge that her mother was probably still watching.

***

"You. Why are you here…?"

"Huh? Why am I here…?"

I hadn't even prepared an excuse. I decided to wing it and see where it led.

"Did you forget what happened?"

If she had, at least my current mess wouldn't get any worse.

"…You didn't do anything weird, did you?!"

The way she suddenly clutched her blanket and glared at me suggested she really didn't remember.

"…I swear I didn't. Friends don't do that kind of thing."

I waved my hands defensively, signaling that whatever she was thinking, it wasn't true.

"Right…?"

Her quick shift from suspicion to acceptance made her seem easygoing, but knowing who was watching her, I couldn't treat her the same way anymore.

"…So, how'd you get into my room?"

Ah.

How was I supposed to explain this? If I told her the truth, she might remember everything and start questioning me.

But saying nothing would only make me look guiltier.

“The door… was open.”

A flimsy excuse, but the best I could manage with my frazzled mind.

Judging by her expression, she wasn’t buying it.

Or so I thought until she said something completely unexpected.

“Then let’s go get lunch.”

“Lunch…?”

Wasn’t she about to interrogate me?

Suddenly, memories of her waking me up on the first night surfaced.

“…Wasn’t that why you came?”

She probably thought I was doing what she’d done—waking her up for a meal.

“Oh, right. Let’s go eat together.”

I didn’t want to risk further misunderstandings, so I quickly left the room, letting her follow silently behind me.

As we walked toward the dining hall, I couldn’t stop thinking.

…What do I do now?

The weight of the future and Hoyeon’s presence pressed heavily on my mind.

I tried to convince myself it wasn’t because of Byeolbi’s ominous words.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 41

Chapter 41

Unintended, but…

“Don’t you have an appetite?”

“…Yes. Somehow, I don’t feel very hungry today.”

Something seemed off about his eating. Not that he was ever the type to eat with great enthusiasm, but this time he was barely nibbling at his food.

…No matter how much I thought about it, something must have happened after we visited that shop. Even as I tried to recall, I couldn’t grasp any clue.

Well, I’ll think about it later. If I can’t remember it, it’s probably not that important.

One thing I was confident in was my memory. If even I forgot, then it really might not be a big deal.

Still, Dogeon had been staring blankly into space like a soulless person for a while now, and I was a little worried.

He seemed lost in thought. Watching him look like someone who’d already lived out their entire life made me feel like I’d fall into contemplation myself, so I decided not to dwell on it.

Men often have worries they can't share with others. It's something people, whether socially adept or not, tend to dismiss with phrases like, "Man up," or "What's the big deal?"

That's why men often couldn't even confide in their family about their troubles. Dogeon must have his own burdens to bear.

Rather than clumsily comforting him, I figured it was better to let him think things through on his own.

We weren't close enough for him to share such deep concerns, even as friends. Besides, how could an outsider understand the worries of someone socially adept?

For instance, if he were struggling with the dilemma of liking a girl more than his current girlfriend…

…Just thinking about it irritated me.

"…A well."

That aside, I never thought I'd be able to taste the flavors of home on this distant continent.

But I could say with certainty—this was the taste of home. Though the ingredients were different, the flavor was just like the one the chef uncle back home used to make.

I'd been eating it for days now and was starting to get a little tired of it, but it was better than venturing out and falling into some culinary trap.

After all, the menu here included hot dishes with a minty smell that were downright disgusting.

Of course, that was the extreme case, but none of the other dishes appealed to me either.

Maybe that steak I had first… I might be able to enjoy it now.

But I ate it alone back then, so it was bound to taste bad. Even if the flavor was lacking, it was more than enough to eat with company.

Having someone to eat with made all the difference.

After finishing my plate, I turned to Dogeon and noticed that his food was hardly touched.

A chunk of meat was missing, just enough for me to tell he'd eaten something.

Had something really happened? I'd never seen him this drained before. Not even when I was angry with him.

Back then, I could at least tell he was trying to find a way out of the situation.

Looking at Dogeon now, it seemed like he had no energy or will to do anything.

It reminded me of myself in a past life.

I debated whether to stay seated or get up.

If I just sat there waiting, we might be stuck like this forever. But getting up felt like I'd be interrupting his thoughts.

After a good amount of internal conflict, I stood up.

"…Ah, you're finished?"

Sitting around was clearly going nowhere. I decided I needed to drag him outside.

"Have you even eaten anything?"

"…Yes."

Now that I got a closer look, he was even avoiding eye contact.

For a moment, I wondered if he was feeling guilty about sneaking into my room while I slept. But I dismissed the idea. A friend wouldn't do something like that.

No way. Never. Even if he does see me as a girl, that was just an accident.

If I were a man, and some girl suddenly pulled me into a locker and her chest pressed against me?

No way I'd hold back.

In fact, the fact that Dogeon managed to stop there was impressive.

If that's not it, then what is it? Could it be… he's only now starting to feel guilty?

If that were the case, his current state would make sense to some extent.

After all, seeking forgiveness and harboring guilt are two different things.

Even when I scolded him, he didn't seem remorseful—just desperate to be forgiven.

If I asked myself whether I'd forgiven him, I already had.

No one can look at only one person for their entire life. It's normal to talk to others.

The reason I got angry was that I saw him in that situation while I was already upset.

…Honestly, seeing it now would probably still make me mad.

But as long as he didn't blatantly grope someone's butt, hug them, hold hands, or laugh while staring into their eyes in front of me, I was willing to let it slide.

Because we're friends.

“If this is about the incident at the gym, you don’t need to feel bad. I’ve already forgiven you.”

“…Huh? Forgiven me?”

He reacted like I’d said something completely unexpected, making me wonder if I’d guessed wrong. But I needed to forgive him at some point.

Might as well do it now.

“That’s right. Just… try to be a bit more considerate of others. For some, human relationships are… very, very sensitive matters.”

I still got annoyed when I remembered him asking if I had any friends. But he’d once said this to me:

“Friends overlook mistakes, learn from them, and grow together.”

So, if I could let his mistakes go and correct them, that should be enough.

“Yes, I’ll be more careful.”

Having been unexpectedly forgiven, Dogeon seemed genuinely relieved.

Though his complexion was still a bit pale, at least he looked like he had the will to do something again. That was good enough.

Dragging him energetically out of the cafeteria was fine, but now I had no idea what we could do.

In both my past and current lives, weekends were for staying in and relaxing. Thinking about doing something outside didn’t come naturally to me.

A PC room would’ve been nice, but there was no way this world had something like that, especially with its poor soundproofing.

“…Did you have anything in mind?”

“No, not really. But if it’s okay with you, I’d like to explore the academy a bit… Would that be alright?”

Exploring the academy, huh.

It was probably no different from a university campus tour. But then I remembered wandering around alone before.

Having someone with me might make it fun. And if that someone was my only friend, even better.

“Sure, let’s do that. So, where do you want to start?”

Seeing Dogeon’s faint smile return lifted my spirits as well.

“…In that case, how about the zoo?”

***

“Still not here…”

Seated on a chair, Stefania mulled over her thoughts while stepping on Iris.

After a day had passed, she wasn’t too surprised. Even if Hoyeon came from a faraway land, she was a princess. It wasn’t as if she would heed the words of some noble from a foreign nation.

On the second day, Stefania had let it slide. It wasn’t unusual for some people to respond to rumors about her with a “So what?” attitude.

By the third day, she thought Hoyeon was stubborn. Surely, after spending that much time at the academy, she must have realized who Stefania was.

But by the fourth and fifth days, Stefania was certain:

Hoyeon knew exactly who she was, yet was deliberately ignoring her proposal.

As she continued to trample Iris like a footstool, Stefania tried to clear her cluttered mind.

“Ah!… Stefania, please!”

“No, no, Iris. A footstool isn’t supposed to talk.”

Oh dear, had she pressed too hard?

Stefania eased the pressure on her foot, just enough so Iris could barely endure the pain. Then she resumed her persistent trampling, ensuring it inflicted just enough discomfort.

Recently, she’d been under a lot of pressure. Someone had trespassed on her sanctuary, and Gloria had started openly targeting her.

While she could unleash the power of demons and take the entire academy down with her, Stefania had no desire to die.

With the coming of the Demon God just around the corner, falling to mere church hounds or faceless nobodies would be a fate worse than collapsing at the finish line.

Stefania found the idea horrifying.

As for Gloria, cutting off a few of her close aides and offering them up as scapegoats would suffice. However, Stefania had no clue how to deal with the unknown intruder in her sanctuary.

This trespasser left no identifiable traces, provoked her, and escaped effortlessly. The little she knew about their skill level wasn’t enough to figure out their identity.

In her view, all the highly skilled individuals she knew maintained amicable relations with her, so there was no reason for them to infiltrate her sanctuary.

Her conclusion was that the intruder must have been a new arrival or an outsider she was completely unfamiliar with.

Her solution was to set an enticing bait and wait for the intruder to take the hook.

The first priority for Stefania was to identify who they were. Only then could she decide whether to intimidate them or win them over.

With a temporary plan in place to deal with her greatest threat, Stefania turned her attention to Hoyeon.

The problem was that Hoyeon had already seen through and destroyed the enchanted artifact Stefania had disguised as a gift to spy on her.

Because of that, she couldn't resort to aggressive measures against Hoyeon.

On top of that, the information from the demon—that the Demon God resided on the eastern continent—kept her from making any rash moves.

Hoyeon had come from the eastern empire. There was a chance she was somehow connected to the Demon God.

This might have been an extreme leap in logic, but Stefania had survived countless crises by preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Thus, she began contemplating how to establish an amicable relationship with Hoyeon.

She dismissed as nonsense the obvious slander circulating that Hoyeon favored some commoner. Clearly, it was a fabrication meant to tarnish her reputation.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 42

Chapter 42: The Zoo

I hadn't expected much since it was a facility within the academy, but it far exceeded what I thought a zoo could be.

"That's… an elephant!"

I had assumed it would just barely pass for a zoo, with a few rabbits, cats, some cute birds, and maybe a token predator or two.

But it was the real deal.

"Oh, do you recognize it?"

"…I've seen it in books. This is my first time seeing one in person."

That little bit of knowledge left me in an awkward spot, as if I were showing off unnecessarily. But how could anyone not marvel at the sight of an elephant?

Even though I was a woman now, the dormant boyish thrill within me stirred at the sight of something so massive and majestic.

Even in a fantasy world, there were no dinosaurs? That was a genuine disappointment, but at least there were animals this big.

Initially, I'd intended to chat leisurely with Dogeon while strolling through the exhibits.

But after discovering something like this, that thought flew right out of my mind.

“Now then, next! Let’s go to the next one!”

“…You seem a little excited.”

I didn’t bother denying it. I was definitely excited.

I hadn’t expected such a fantastic attraction, but Dogeon had made a good choice!

“Then, after the general animal section, we can visit the divine beast and… magical beast exhibit. Would that be alright?”

Magical beasts, huh.

Hmm… I wasn’t too sure. I’d never seen anything I’d call a magical beast before.

I’d encountered various fantasy-like creatures, but they all behaved like domesticated dogs, so I’d never felt any sense of danger from them.

The closest was when I first met a deity who took the form of a giant dragon. For a moment, I felt utterly overwhelmed.

Not even exaggerating—it was so massive that I genuinely feared it might accidentally crush the palace just by moving.

“What are you talking about?”

Still, unless it was on that scale, there wasn’t much to worry about.

“Well, it’s just that… divine beasts are gentle, but magical beasts are usually ferocious.”

“And what of it?”

Ferocious or not, they were locked in cages. What was there to fear? The mention of divine beasts intrigued me, though—I did want to see them.

Ever since arriving on this continent, anything with “divine” in its name had been odd and unpleasant, so I was curious.

“If you’re fine with it, then let’s go.”

Dogeon didn’t press the matter further and started leading the way.

The first impression upon entering was that the atmosphere felt different.

It wasn’t refreshing—magic in the air felt about the same. But there was a strange sense of familiarity.

It felt somewhat like speaking with a deity, though faint enough to barely notice.

As expected of a magical beast exhibit, the animals had uniquely distinctive appearances.

The cages were larger and thicker, with some animals completely isolated behind glass barriers.

In contrast, the divine beasts were often enclosed with simple wooden fences or even left to roam freely.

It felt like blatant favoritism, but the magical beasts looked so menacing that I couldn’t argue against it.

The divine beasts were all white, with wings or beautiful patterns that made them seem harmless.

The magical beasts, on the other hand, were terrifying—one had a human face grotesquely embedded in an insect’s body, while another had hooks and spines covering its entire form.

…Even with the faint presence of divinity, approaching them felt out of the question.

The magical beasts seemed to regard me with friendly gazes, which made me feel guilty, but I decided to focus on the divine beasts today.

They paid no attention to Dogeon—in fact, some looked at him as if he were prey.

“How about… we just look at the divine beasts for today?”

Seeing that no one else was around, I dropped the formal speech.

It wasn’t that I disliked the way my father had taught me to speak, but it felt more like addressing a subordinate than a friend, and that didn’t sit well with me.

“I figured the magical beasts might be too much, right?”

I was fine with it, but it didn’t seem like Dogeon would be.

“…Yeah.”

There was no need to say it aloud. I could always come back to see the magical beasts on my own later. No point in risking Dogeon’s safety.

“Then… how about we start with this one?”

***

She gravitated toward unexpected animals like elephants, giraffes, and lions.

I thought she’d at least show some interest in cute animals like cats or rabbits, but she completely ignored them.

Even for someone like her, magical beasts were probably a bit much.

While I didn’t know what the monsters in the eastern continent looked like, the ones on this continent were uniformly grotesque, according to the original work.

The distinction between monsters and magical beasts was simple:

Did they attack humans on sight? If yes, they were monsters. If not, they were magical beasts.

The setting stated that creatures became corrupted by magical energy, transforming into those forms. Divine beasts, conversely, were exposed to divine energy.

Though divine beasts were safer than monsters, magical beasts were still undeniably dangerous.

She seemed to understand this and suggested we focus on the divine beasts.

“Then… let’s start with this one.”

I chose the unicorn. In the original story, it was famous for its ability to detect virgins. It also had a gentle temperament toward them, so it would surely behave for Hoyeon.

It had once nuzzled Anastasia and even requested a lap pillow, so I figured it would do the same for Hoyeon.

According to the author’s later notes, a unicorn would only display such affection toward someone who fulfilled specific “virginity” conditions.

I didn’t fully understand what that meant, but apparently, some readers supported heroines just because of it.

Yet, the unicorn’s behavior seemed odd.

It kept taking a step forward, then a step back, over and over again.

If the person wasn’t a virgin, it would get angry and refuse to let them approach. If they were, it would eagerly draw near.

What was this behavior supposed to mean? I couldn’t make sense of it.

“…Don’t worry, come here. I won’t eat you…”

Hoyeon, unfazed, cheerfully called out to the unicorn.

While it wasn't intelligent enough to understand her words, the way she coaxed it was endearing.

But deep down, a sense of unease began to creep in.

If she wasn't a virgin…?

I knew it was a ridiculous thought. And even if it were true, it wouldn't make me distance myself from her. Unlike readers, I wasn't picky about such things.

Still, wouldn't it be better if she was?

Tilting her head curiously, Hoyeon started walking toward the unicorn.

The unicorn mirrored her movements, stepping backward cautiously to maintain the distance.

Did she have a lover despite not having friends? If she knew the touch of a man, it wasn't entirely out of the question.

Or had it been nothing but physical indulgence without love?

If my suspicions were correct, I might feel a bit betrayed.

"Come here, I said! I won't eat you, I promise."

Just as I was about to point out that the unicorn couldn't understand her words, something unbelievable happened.

The unicorn, looking utterly defeated, began approaching her.

Even though I couldn't read animal expressions well, it was clear even to me that it was trembling with fear.

…Surely, it didn't understand her words.

The author had explicitly stated that the unicorn's only special ability was detecting virgins.

Then what was I seeing right now?

From its behavior, it was obvious the unicorn understood her. Could Hoyeon have the ability to communicate with animals?

Though beastfolk were said to have an affinity with animals, there was no mention of being able to converse with them.

"…Good. That's a good boy. There, there…"

Despite its fear, the unicorn obediently moved closer to her, and for a moment, I saw myself in its place.

The unicorn seemed to be experiencing the same feeling of dread I had when she scolded me.

Like prey before a predator, every step radiated reluctance.

"…Good boy. No need to be scared."

Watching it nuzzle her head while its eyes reflected pure terror, I couldn't help but feel pity for it.

Its wide eyes seemed to plead for release even as it rested on her lap.

"…Okay, you can go now."

As if understanding her words, the unicorn bolted in the opposite direction, vanishing in a flash.

So, she was a virgin after all.

I must have been overly suspicious. After all, who would be foolish enough to try anything under the watchful eyes of Byeolbi?

Byeolbi was still terrifying. When she had said she saw everything, my resolve had almost crumbled—and nearly did.

Until Hoyeon forgave me during lunch, I was genuinely considering giving up.

But after receiving her forgiveness, my perspective shifted a little.

Instead of giving up, I resolved to pursue her and uncover the mysterious "question" I needed to ask.

Since Hoyeon showed interest in me, and Byeolbi had given me leeway as long as she didn't kill me, this was the only conclusion I could reach.

…I wasn't ready to give up yet.

On the harem. Or the happy ending.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 43

Chapter 43: At the Library

Even on the day I confirmed she was a virgin—and the day after—there wasn't any real progress to speak of.

All I'd learned was that Hoyeon liked big animals and that divine beasts seemed terrified of her—entirely useless information.

Fortunately, she seemed to be in a better mood, but ultimately, I'd only taken one step back to take one step forward. I was back where I started.

My relationships with the other heroines remained stagnant. I hadn't even met Camilla or Iris, so things might actually have gotten worse.

And since Hoyeon kept sticking to me, I couldn't even talk to the other heroines.

Still, I wasn't too worried.

The midterm exams were coming up, and I knew there would be opportunities to interact then.

Though I felt uneasy with Hoyeon as an unpredictable variable, it wasn't something I could control, so I didn't dwell on it.

I couldn't interfere with the exam groupings for the physical test, so all I could do for now was strengthen my bond with Hoyeon before the midterms.

"Are you not worried about the exams, Hoyeon?"

I asked her during lunch.

There were only two and a half weeks left until the exams, and half the students were already hitting the books.

The exams at the start of the term were primarily to assess our knowledge levels, but given that most students at Amaurus Academy were nobles, the bar was set exceptionally high.

What's more, poor grades meant expulsion, even for princes or princesses.

Hoyeon, however, spent her class time either sleeping or reading unrelated books.

"Pfft, aren't most of them just rote memorization? A week is more than enough time to cram."

She sounded confident, her rare look of self-assurance showing as she brushed off the exams with an air of nonchalance.

"What about you? Have you been preparing for the exams?"

"Memorization is manageable, but… math is the problem."

Back when I took the college entrance exam, I scored in the top two tiers for everything except math, where I barely scraped by with a fifth-tier score.

The math here was at a high school level, but even that felt overwhelming. Just seeing numbers gave me anxiety.

"Math, huh?"

"Yes."

"If that's the case, I could teach you."

"…Pardon?"

I didn't doubt her academic capabilities, but she didn't seem like someone particularly fond of math.

“I don’t know what your math level is, but I can guarantee it’s better than yours.”

Well, obviously. Her private education likely surpassed what the academy offered.

Seeing her this confident for the first time, I didn’t think she was lying.

“…Would you be willing to teach me, then?”

It didn’t seem like a bad idea—improving my grades and building rapport with Hoyeon at the same time.

While failing one math test wouldn’t lead to expulsion, better grades always felt rewarding.

“For someone seeking my teaching, you’re awfully arrogant. Call me teacher, and I might consider it.”

Her teasing smile made her look smug, but I knew how to handle this.

“Your humble student humbly requests your wisdom, teacher. Please bestow your knowledge upon me.”

“…”

The effect was immediate.

Her smug expression melted into one of embarrassment.

“…I-I was just joking. Why are you like this…”

Fortunately, no one else was around, so she let her guard down and reverted to her usual self.

“…You don’t need to call me teacher. Just come to the library after gym class. I’ll teach you what I know.”

“Got it.”

By the time I secured this promise from her, lunch was nearly over. Since she mentioned the library after gym, she likely wasn't planning to stick with me today.

I felt a little guilty about using her trust, but I planned to finally make some progress with Exipri.

Last time, her temper derailed everything, but this time, I was determined to focus on building rapport with a heroine other than Hoyeon.

As I left for the gym, a silver-haired girl brushed past me. It looked like Anastasia, but it was probably my imagination.

Regardless, I hurried toward the gym, unwilling to catch the attention of the ever-irritable Georg.

***

Teacher, huh.

I wasn't sure why being called that made me feel so flustered. I knew it was coming, but I still fell for it.

Is this what makes socially adept people so good at countering others?

Academically, he didn't seem as competent as I was.

Still, I'd learned through experience that social skills were more important than academics in life. Seeing Dogeon act so casually made me envious.

I never felt anything when students called me teacher during tutoring sessions, so why did it stir me up when Dogeon said it?

I thought it would feel similar to gaming friends calling me bro, but it felt completely different.

…And apparently, Anastasia wasn't hiding anymore.

She was blatantly trailing me from a distance. She seemed to be trying to muffle her footsteps with mana or stay in my blind spots, but…

…Yeah, no.

I could see her clearly.

I didn't bother addressing her. I planned to wait for Dogeon and read a book in the meantime, so I ignored her presence.

When I reached the library, someone new was guarding the entrance.

"Welcome, Baek Hoyeon. I am Angelos, the librarian and manager of this library."

Previously, there had been a man responding mechanically. Now, a woman spoke fluently.

"What happened to the previous one?"

"Oh, you mean Octavius? His time was up, so he was disposed of."

…Disposed of?

Even if the way they spoke was odd, saying he was outright killed instead of fired?

"You mean… a person?"

"It seems you weren't aware. All the librarians here are homunculi, myself included."

Ah, so they were homunculi. I hadn't realized since they looked so human.

"A homunculus… You mean an artificial human?"

"Yes. For simple tasks, employing beings like us is far more economical than hiring real people."

So it was all about money. Somehow, that made it even more unsettling.

They looked so human, yet they were mass-produced and worked until they died.

It didn't sit right with me.

"If you have no further questions, please enjoy the library at your leisure."

"…Very well. Carry on."

"I hope you find the book you're looking for."

On the eastern continent, artificial beings weren't unheard of, but they didn't mimic humans to this extent.

There, they were more like clay figures imbued with magic to perform tasks, never with the intelligence to hold conversations like this.

…It felt unsettling.

Not the existence of homunculi themselves, but the fact that they were created for money.

Honestly, if it weren't for Dogeon, I wouldn't have stepped foot in this place.

Suppressing the unease swirling within me, I found a quiet corner with some books.

Whatever else, I couldn't deny that this continent's novels were entertaining.

Back home, the books were dull—half were hymns praising deities, and another quarter was about returning to nature.

For someone with a taste honed by web novels and films, they felt painfully bland.

Here, though, novels often portrayed goddesses as flawed or clumsy, which made for enjoyable reading.

It was a wonder the church hadn't banned them as heretical.

"Uh…"

Oh, this is good. As expected, the priest was the culprit. Seeing the protagonist publicly expose him before the villagers felt cathartic after all the buildup.

"Excuse me… um…"

Who would interrupt someone's reading like this? How rude.

…It was Anastasia. She'd followed me all the way here. She'd never gotten this close before.

"Uh… Hello, Hoyeon? Fancy meeting you here. What a coincidence!"

Her awkwardness was so palpable that pointing it out felt cruel.

Yet I couldn't help but feel a strange kinship with her.

She reminded me so much of my younger self in high school, when I'd realized I might die alone in my room if I didn't make friends.

I couldn't respond as smoothly as Dogeon might, but still, shouldn't I try to help a fellow kindred spirit?

Having experienced the loneliness of not having friends, I decided to engage with her.

"Anastasia, isn't it? What a coincidence indeed, meeting you here. Please, have a seat."

I even pulled out a chair for her.

After spending time with Dogeon, I'd noticed he always made sure my seat was prepared before sitting himself.

So I followed suit.

"Uh… Can I really sit here?"

"Of course."

As she awkwardly settled into the chair, I gave her a reassuring smile and closed my book.

"…"

"…"

…But neither of us dared to speak first.

""So then…""

When we finally mustered the courage to speak, we ended up talking at the same time, making it even more awkward.

"After you…"

"No, please, you go first…"

…This was going nowhere.

I had to break the cycle somehow.

"…Alright, then. Do you enjoy reading?"

Even as I asked, I cringed internally. It was a terrible question, but it was better than the silence.

"Not really… I'm not much of a reader…"

It didn't take five seconds for me to realize I'd chosen the wrong topic.

Maybe I should’ve brought up swordsmanship instead?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 44

Chapter 44: Study Group (But Not Really)

Somewhere in Chile, there's supposedly a word that can be summarized as, "Who wants to volunteer as leader?"

I couldn't recall it precisely, but the idea was that everyone knew something needed to be done, yet no one wanted to take responsibility, so they silently hoped someone else would step up.

That word came to mind as I realized that most of the exchanges between Anastasia and me were just us gauging each other's reactions.

When even my best attempt at conversation failed, we both, as if by mutual agreement, fell silent and pretended to read.

More accurately, we both pretended to read while secretly hoping the other would start a conversation. If I was doing it, Anastasia probably was too.

I lost count of how many times our eyes met when I glanced at her mid-read.

Two hours.

That's how long we spent pretending to read while covertly stealing glances at each other.

…Inviting her to sit down only to end up like this felt pathetic.

I tried initiating conversation here and there, but we never managed to exchange more than ten sentences at a time.

For example, I asked what perfume she used, only for her to reply she didn't wear any. That was the end of that topic.

I considered bringing up swordsmanship but stopped myself. It wasn't a topic I knew much about or found interesting, while Anastasia was clearly knowledgeable in that field.

Her sword was of high quality, and her stances were far superior to my clumsy attempts.

More than anything, I didn't want to sit through a conversation about something I didn't understand.

If she was anything like me, the moment we touched on something she was passionate about, she'd probably get carried away and talk endlessly.

One of the few things I'm good at is reflecting on my own behavior.

Back in high school, I once decided to make friends by talking about video games nonstop.

The moment I realized how annoying I must've been, I gave up on making friends altogether.

Accepting that I wasn't cut out for friendship brought me a strange sense of peace.

That aside…

I still remember the faces of those poor kids who had to endure my endless rambling back then.

I didn't want to make Anastasia wear that same expression.

I briefly considered simply managing my facial expressions, but I knew I wasn't good at hiding my emotions.

“…”

Since I was the one who invited her to sit, it felt wrong to get up first. On the other hand, she didn’t seem inclined to leave either—or perhaps she wanted to leave but felt too awkward to do so.

Either way, the result was the same.

The one to break this punishment-like silence was none other than Dogeon.

“Oh, Hoyeon!… Ma’am. And Anastasia, too?”

He had started addressing me casually but instantly shifted to formal speech upon noticing Anastasia. The quick switch sent a chill down my spine.

How could someone transition so smoothly? Even I couldn’t pull that off.

“Oh, you’ve arrived.”

“And you are… Dogeon, was it?”

“I never expected Anastasia to remember me! It’s an honor. As I mentioned before, my name is Han Dogeon. It’s a pleasure to meet you again.”

For some reason, Anastasia’s expression toward Dogeon wasn’t particularly friendly.

It was subtle, but her face hinted at dislike, as if she were looking at something unpleasant.

…What’s this about?

“…Yes, nice to meet you.”

Her tone was anything but sincere.

Come to think of it, standing naturally beside Dogeon was Ethan. Dogeon surely noticed, so why hadn’t he said anything?

“…My name is Ethan. Dogeon mentioned there would be a study group here, so I came to join.”

Ah, so Dogeon brought him along. Damn extrovert. His friends were multiplying.

I’d expected him to be a cocky delinquent, but instead, he was unexpectedly polite. Calling this a “study group” was a stretch—it was more like a casual study session among friends.

But seriously, why are you even here?

“I don’t recall inviting you.”

I subtly hinted for Ethan to leave. Though we were in the same class, and he looked intimidating enough that I couldn’t outright tell him to go away.

“…I thought Anastasia would also be participating. Was I mistaken?”

Strictly speaking, Anastasia wasn’t participating in a study session. She’d just come to chat with me. Still, I understood what Ethan was implying:

“Why does she get to stay, but I don’t?”

That phrasing pricked my conscience, but it didn’t change my decision.

“One extra person is fine, but two is a different story.”

In other words, no.

“Hoyeon, wouldn’t it be fine to include one more person? Since we’re all here to learn, it would be kind of you to help Ethan as well.”

Why was Dogeon butting in now?!

With Dogeon vouching for Ethan, I felt it would be difficult to turn him away outright. But I really didn’t want to include him.

Then it hit me—I could use Anastasia. As a northern duchess, she held considerable authority and had arrived first. If she said no, I'd have a valid excuse to refuse, even to Dogeon.

"I don't mind."

Ah, wonderful.

I hadn't even asked the question, but the moment our eyes met, she answered. I didn't have the energy to argue.

"…Fine. One more should be okay."

"Thank you for your generosity."

And with Anastasia now pulling out a notebook of her own, I found myself stuck teaching not one, but three people.

…What else could I do? Letting out a resigned sigh, I opened the math textbook.

***

Meeting Ethan had been pure coincidence—something I thought might happen eventually.

It was after enduring Georg's torturous excuse for a class and on my way to Hoyeon's session.

We were in the same class, though he'd been a lower priority due to my focus on Hoyeon. Still, he was a necessary ally in the long run.

His appearance and mannerisms screamed delinquent, but I knew it was a disguise to conceal his identity as an Apostle of the Church.

Fortunately, he showed interest first, making things easier.

When I mentioned studying with Hoyeon, I invited him to join if he wasn't busy.

The moment I mentioned her name, he agreed without hesitation.

But when we arrived, Anastasia was already there. For some reason, she didn't seem pleased to see me.

Neither did Hoyeon welcome Ethan's presence.

Had they been having some kind of girl talk? There was no way for me to know.

Even keeping up with Hoyeon's studies was overwhelming enough.

"So, exponential functions and logarithms are inverse functions… Anastasia, do you know what I'm saying?"

"W-What? Oh, yes! Of course. Um… they're inverse functions, right?"

"…Do you even know what an inverse function is?"

"…Something difficult?"

To be honest, I didn't understand a thing either. I'd stopped studying math back in middle school. Throwing logarithms into the mix was just cruel.

Predictably, Anastasia didn't understand a word. Ethan, however, caught on surprisingly quickly.

"So, if a is raised to the power of x equals b, then x is the logarithm of b to the base a, right?"

As expected of an Apostle of the Church, he wasn't just physically strong—he was sharp, too. Gloria had shown sharp deductive skills in the original story, so it made sense.

"Exactly, Ethan. Now, Anastasia, do you even know what a function is?"

"…No."

Hoyeon sighed deeply but patiently began explaining functions to Anastasia, while Ethan quietly absorbed knowledge on his own.

“So, how do you read this again…?”

“You start with the small number below, the base, and then the large number above, the argument. So, this is the logarithm of 64 to the base 4. The answer is 3.”

Hoyeon, sharp as ever, responded precisely to even the smallest murmurs.

I had imagined Hoyeon struggling to teach math, gritting her teeth as she tried her best. Instead, she looked like a professional tutor.

Well, professional tutors wouldn’t complain, though.

Watching her reminded me of an old friend—someone awkward with people but enjoyable to be around.

“Surely you can manage multiplication tables?”

“What do you take me for? Of course I can!”

I didn’t know what Hoyeon expected from Anastasia, but I’d bet her knowledge didn’t extend much beyond multiplication.

“…Let’s take a break.”

“Do we have breaks? Excellent, let’s rest a bit.”

Even someone like Ethan, who acted like a delinquent, grew quiet in the presence of royalty and nobility. Then again, he wasn’t a real delinquent, just playing the part.

“Dogeon. I distinctly remember inviting only you.”

“Ahaha… Well, you see, I couldn’t just turn away someone who wanted to join.”

As I stretched lazily, Hoyeon suddenly addressed me with a slightly irritated look.

“Even so…!”

“Didn’t you also invite Anastasia?”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t invite anyone else. She just happened to come on her own.”

“I see.”

So Anastasia’s presence here was purely coincidental? What a stroke of luck.

“Exactly.”

“Then I apologize.”

It seemed Hoyeon really intended to teach only me. Since I’d ruined that, I felt the need to apologize.

“…No, there’s no need to apologize. It’s fine.”

“No, please accept my apology. It’s bothering me.”

This was also an apology for not being able to focus solely on her. As much as I felt sorry, I couldn’t devote myself to just one person.

As long as there was a chance, I didn’t want to give up.

“…Fine, if you insist…”

For a moment, it felt like the princess act had slipped, and I couldn’t help but smile.

But it didn’t last long.

“Pardon the interruption, Hoyeon. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you privately. Would that be alright?”

Ethan’s sudden interjection broke the mood.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 45

Chapter 45: A Small Misunderstanding

“I don’t have anything to discuss with you.”

Naturally, I had no intention of going anywhere with Ethan. Why would I follow someone who had been lurking and stalking me this whole time?

Because of him, I had to take convoluted detours just to talk to Dogeon in peace.

And honestly, I didn’t have a good impression of him—not with that smug face of his.

“…It seems you don’t remember. Allow me to remind you. Do you know the extent of the damage your escort caused to my family?”

Ah, so it was that story.

Here I thought he was trying to lure me out to flirt or something, but this turned out to be a matter involving money.

To be honest, I didn’t remember much about those negotiations. Every time I sat at the table, I avoided eye contact and distracted myself with other thoughts. I couldn’t even recall who I spoke to.

All I remembered was whether they were male or female, old or young—that’s about it. My mind went blank the moment I sat down, and I likely repeated the same points over and over.

If he wanted an apology, I was willing to give one. Even I thought my methods of crossing the continent were excessive.

But I had my reasons—if I hadn't done it that way, I would've been a month late to the academy.

I didn't have time to follow all the procedures and pay the fees properly.

"…If that's what this is about, fine. Lead the way."

Still, I owed him an apology. If I was in the wrong, I should at least say sorry. Whether he was a real victim or not, it was better to apologize than to risk creating unnecessary resentment.

"This way, then."

I felt uneasy leaving Dogeon alone with Anastasia, but surely he wouldn't mess up again after apologizing and earning forgiveness.

He was my friend, after all.

Trusting Dogeon, I followed Ethan out of the library.

"…Before we begin, could you look at this for a moment?"

"What is it?"

Ethan produced something that looked like a coin attached to a string.

It wasn't a coin, though—it was too finely crafted, and its shape wasn't perfectly circular. It seemed more like a symbol of some sort.

It looked vaguely similar to the symbols I'd seen in churches.

He dangled it in front of me.

So what? Was he trying to hypnotize me or something?

As expected, no matter how civilized he acted, a golden sun's true nature couldn't be hidden.

Luring me in with fancy talk only to try something shady—it was laughable.

"Do you feel anything from this?"

"Feel? The only thing I feel is annoyance. If you called me out here for some nonsense like this, get lost."

If he had simply wanted an apology, I would have given it. But calling me out for this ridiculous stunt? No way.

Too bad for him—it didn't work on me.

At this point, it didn't matter whether he was a real victim or not.

Having said my piece, I turned back toward the library without so much as a glance. While he might have been decent at absorbing class material, as I initially thought…

Appearance isn't everything, after all. Wait, no—that's taking it too far.

Still, appearances could be telling. This was a novel world, after all, where stereotypes held some weight.

Resolving to be more cautious of people based on their appearances, I headed back to the floor where Anastasia and Dogeon were waiting.

"…What do you think of Hoyeon?"

If I hadn't overheard Anastasia say that, I would've walked right to their table without a second thought.

But her words made me stop in my tracks, almost reflexively.

She was probably talking to Dogeon. Considering the content, barging in seemed awkward, and besides, I was curious.

For all I knew, Dogeon might tell others we weren't close at all, despite calling me a friend.

I didn't need to dig into old memories to confirm this—it was a common trope in the stories I read to pass time in the past.

So, what would Dogeon say? I was genuinely interested.

More importantly, I needed to address why he'd been chatting with others when I wasn't around—and why he'd dragged along that walking libido Ethan.

"Hoyeon…? She's my precious first friend. But why are you asking this so suddenly?"

Hmm. I had worried for a moment that I was the only one considering us friends, but it turned out Dogeon genuinely valued me as a friend.

Maybe I didn't need to scold him too harshly after all.

After all, his intentions were good. And maybe Anastasia was the one who initiated their conversation.

"…Don't acknowledge me in the swordsmanship club. I didn't take you for someone like that."

"What?"

Hmm. This was taking a strange turn.

I didn't want Dogeon to be disliked, so this seemed like the perfect moment to step in.

"Ahem, I see. So, you also consider me a friend."

"Hoyeon…"

"Hoyeon, you've returned."

Anastasia greeted me with a conflicted expression, while Dogeon's relief was so obvious it was almost comical.

"Anastasia, don't be too harsh on Dogeon. He's not the type with ill intentions."

"…Why does Hoyeon defend him so much?"

Oh dear. It seemed Dogeon had managed to earn Anastasia's ire somehow. I tried to meditate, but she didn't look like she'd back down easily.

Why do I defend him?

"Because he's my friend."

For some reason, her expression turned to shock as she stared at me.

"…Is being friends… truly enough for you?"

What was with her? She was asking strange questions, but I still answered earnestly.

"Of course."

What other kind of relationship could I have with him? Beyond friendship, the next step would be…

…Yeah, no. I wasn't attracted to women, but I wasn't drawn to men either. If someone asked whether I was interested in dating anyone, my answer would be no—for now.

"…If that's how you feel, Hoyeon…"

I had no idea why she looked so distraught and pitiful all of a sudden.

Before I could dwell on it, the golden sun himself walked in, as if he owned the place.

“…Looks like everyone’s here. Shall we resume the lesson? Or do you need more time to rest?”

“…No.”

“Feel free to start.”

“No objections.”

Why was it so annoying every time Ethan spoke?

But that was beside the point.

***

‘It didn’t work.’

Ethan fiddled with the relic in his pocket.

The pendant of the goddess.

It was something he had borrowed from Gloria—a necklace said to have belonged to the goddess when she was human.

Only the first Apostles could carry such an artifact, but Ethan had managed to borrow it under the pretense of using it on Hoyeon.

Simply carrying the pendant could repel dark energy, and presenting it to a user of dark magic would cause their body to burn.

Ethan had been observing Hoyeon for over a week. Except for that first incident during gym class, she hadn’t used dark magic since.

Yet Ethan was convinced he had felt dark energy emanating from her.

Though inferior to other Apostles in every way, his one talent—detecting dark magic—was what had made him an Apostle in the first place. He trusted that talent implicitly.

So, risking expulsion, he had presented the goddess's pendant to Hoyeon—but nothing happened.

Hoyeon had been angry, but that wasn't Ethan's concern.

If the pendant had no effect, it meant either she wasn't a dark magic user… or she was a demon herself.

But demons had either been purified into spirits by the goddess or sealed within the ley lines.

Ethan was left in a state of confusion.

'If she uses dark energy but isn't a user of dark magic, then what is she?'

He couldn't find an answer.

"Ethan, you're distracted."

"…Ah, yes."

His entire reason for approaching Dogeon had been to test the pendant on Hoyeon.

Now that the pendant had failed, he had no further business here. His priority was to inform Gloria that it hadn't worked.

"…Hoyeon, if it's not an inconvenience, may I leave now?"

"Leaving is up to you. Do you have a reason?"

"It's almost time for prayer."

"Prayer, huh. I didn't think you were the type to be religious. Fine, go."

Hearing her disbelief brought Ethan a small sense of satisfaction—it was proof his disguise was flawless.

"Thank you. I'll take my leave."

***

Shortly after Hoyeon left the table, I decided to engage Anastasia in conversation.

Though she seemed to dislike me, it wasn't to the extent of wanting me to never speak to her.

In the original story, our first meeting had been similarly awkward, so nothing felt particularly off.

But once Hoyeon became the topic of conversation, I started to sense that something was amiss.

"…Have you heard the rumor about the foreign princess—Hoyeon—favoring a commoner?"

"No, this is my first time hearing about it."

I figured such rumors might circulate eventually, given how close we were, but I hadn't expected them to surface so soon.

Still, why bring it up now? Up until that point, Hoyeon hadn't been mentioned at all.

"…What do you think of Hoyeon?"

"Hoyeon? She's my precious first friend. But why do you ask?"

Moments ago, the conversation had been about Anastasia. Now, it has shifted entirely to Hoyeon.

Thinking it was just a passing topic, I shared my thoughts. But Anastasia's expression turned strange.

She looked… angry.

"…Don't acknowledge me in the swordsmanship club. I didn't think you were that kind of person."

“What?”

What was this about?

I had only said Hoyeon was a friend, but something about that had upset Anastasia. I quickly replayed my words in my head, but there was nothing inherently wrong.

And yet, she suddenly didn’t want me to talk to her.

Just as I began to feel confused, Hoyeon’s voice cut in.

“Ahem. I see. So, you also consider me a friend.”

“Hoyeon…”

“Hoyeon, you’re back.”

Her timing couldn’t have been better.

Just as the conversation started to take a strange turn, Hoyeon brought it to a halt.

“Anastasia, don’t be too harsh on Dogeon. He’s not a bad person.”

Though it stung a little, I was grateful to Hoyeon for defending me.

“…Hoyeon, why do you go so far to defend him?”

Anastasia’s expression was a mixture of confusion and frustration as she questioned Hoyeon. Clearly, my defense didn’t sit well with her.

“Because he’s my friend.”

“…Is being friends really enough for you?”

Though I knew the question wasn’t aimed at me, my answer internally was clear: no.

If I wanted to build a harem or aim for a happy ending, I'd have to start with Hoyeon. Friendship wouldn't suffice.

Fortunately, she seemed easy to win over, so I didn't think it would take long.

For now, we were friends—but eventually, she would become my primary companion.

"Of course."

Hoyeon seemed genuinely happy with the idea of just being friends, though.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 46

Chapter 46: Midterm Exam (1)

Teaching Anastasia felt like preaching to a cow.

I was well aware that learning and teaching were two entirely different things.

Even during tutoring sessions, I'd often freeze up because I didn't know how to explain what was in my head. Sure, the student's lack of motivation was the main issue, but I couldn't deny my own share of the blame.

About 30% of it, maybe. If I had taught more clearly, things might have been different. Then again, even when I spoon-fed them everything, most of them were still hopeless cases, so I didn't feel too guilty about it.

Still, maybe I helped them get at least one question right on their college entrance exam.

They were kids from families wealthy enough to afford private tutoring, so they'd probably do just fine in life anyway.

Back to the point. Anastasia's problem was serious. I feared I might have to start by teaching her multiplication and division, but fortunately, it didn't come to that.

However, her level of knowledge wasn't far from it. Basic arithmetic.

Things like exponents, unknown variables, greatest common divisors, and least common multiples could be taught in a day. The problem came after

that.

It took an entire week to get her to understand the concept of square roots. I was on the verge of giving up and just hanging out with Dogeon instead, but since I was the one who volunteered to teach her, I couldn't abandon her halfway through.

Looking back, I think I pushed myself to teach her because there were only about three weeks left until the exam.

"…If (x + 2)^2 – 5 = 3, what is the value of x?"

I wondered if this problem was really nerve-wracking enough to warrant so much tension, but I couldn't help gripping my pen tighter.

Since I had heard her confidently claim she didn't know the order of operations for multiplication and addition, I was afraid all the effort and time I'd poured into teaching her had been in vain.

"Um, so… after moving it to the other side, flipping the sign, and calculating inside the parentheses…"

Her hesitation made me feel uneasy. But then, the answer she gave me filled me with joy.

"x is… -2 ± 2√2… I think? Hoyeon, is that right…?"

Correct. Absolutely correct. All the time and effort I'd invested weren't wasted after all.

"Hoyeon?!"

Overcome with emotion, I pulled Anastasia into a tight hug. It was both a celebration of her achievement and a reward for my own hard work.

Through our clothes, I could clearly feel two soft cushions pressing against me.

As expected—big and soft. No wonder every R-rated chapter had a scene where someone had to grab them with their hands.

Since I'd deliberately chosen a floor filled with upperclassmen who had voluntarily enslaved themselves to teach others, there was no need to worry about anyone watching us.

I also didn't have to worry about noise. Several layers of mana-based soundproofing were in place.

It was like a soundproof wall or a barrier. If it weren't, I would have been told to "shut up" during the very first lesson on this floor.

After hugging her and rubbing against her for a while, I finally let go.

Dogeon was there, watching.

I wished that guy would at least try to control his facial expressions.

He was pretending to act composed, but his eyes were glued to her chest.

I knew he was a guy, and it was understandable, but it still didn't sit well with me.

Speaking of Dogeon, he'd made decent progress through our lessons as well.

Though I spent less time with him because I was busy preparing study materials for both Anastasia and him, as long as he got good scores, that was fine.

Since he barely showed up on weekends except during lunch and dinner, I had this absurd suspicion that he might be hanging out with some other girl.

Surely, he wasn't running around with another girl while I was busy making his study materials, right?

"Correct. Seriously… you've worked so hard. You really did a great job…"

The first part was directed at her, and the second part was something I was saying to myself.

Honestly, I couldn't even count how much energy and patience it took to teach this beast-like girl. Her face was pretty, sure, but that only distracted from her studies.

"I even did all the homework you assigned, Hoyeon! I tried my best! Do you think I'll do well on the math test?!"

"That would be… difficult."

She looked up at me with the eyes of a puppy seeking praise. I felt bad for her, but I didn't want to give her false hope.

If she wanted to see a proper improvement in her grades, she'd have to think long-term — probably until second year. Right now, we were just barely managing to catch her up to her grade level.

"…I can't?"

"Not a chance."

If she had a tail, it would have drooped pitifully. Since I couldn't hold her forever, I took the opportunity to release her as she grew more subdued.

"Alright, let's wrap it up for today. The exam starts tomorrow, so get plenty of rest."

The mood was just right to end the lesson. I felt a little guilty, as if I'd cursed her by pointing out her hopeless situation, but facts were facts.

She'd be lucky if she could even solve the problems on page one.

Her back looked a little lonely as she left.

"Well then, Dogeon… should we head out too?"

"Yeah, let's go."

I silently wished for Anastasia to make friends like Dogeon as soon as possible.

“Hey, did you prepare for the exam?”

“Thanks to you, I think I’ll do well on the math test. How about you?”

I was glad to hear I’d been helpful.

“…Thanks for asking, but you don’t have to worry about me. I’ve got it all under control, so I had time to teach you guys.”

In truth, I’d already finished studying all the memorization-based subjects a week ago.

Ethics was a bit tricky since it had so many concepts I didn’t understand, but since it was a different continent, I figured their ethics could be different too.

But I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that they worshiped gods without offering any kind of tribute.

Unlike me, who could call on the gods whenever I wanted and get an immediate response, other people had to offer tributes depending on the god’s nature.

Money, food, dead animals, even humans sometimes.

As long as you offered something, you could meet a god, but apparently, that wasn’t the case on this continent.

Here, if someone with divine power simply prayed, the gods would help them free of charge.

It didn’t sit right with me. If they were siphoning off divine power and ley lines like that, the gods wouldn’t just sit still and allow it.

“By the way, Professor Georg mentioned that this physical education test is going to be something special.”

“…Why are you bringing up that professor?”

“Well, it’s kind of supposed to be a secret, but he’s the one overseeing the test.”

I knew that the devil of a professor had been giving Dogeon one-on-one training, but I didn’t expect him to spill details like this.

More than that, though, I had a feeling this test was going to be unique. It was a school-life adventure, after all.

“…Can you tell me what it is?”

I had a hunch it would be some kind of duel.

“See that mountain? You team up in groups and survive there for five days.”

“…What?”

They were going to dump us on a mountain and make us survive for five days?

Was this a joke?

“Isn’t that dangerous…?”

“Apparently, there’s nothing to worry about. They’ve got all kinds of safety measures in place. They said even if you want to die, you won’t be able to.”

Why did I feel so uneasy? I thought it’d be something like a sparring match, but survival in the wild? Seriously?

Not that knowing about it would change anything…

“…Thanks for the heads-up.”

It was good to know. Knowing stuff like this was what having a good friend was all about.

Since I'd been teaching them even after dinner, it was already bedtime.

"Well then… good night!"

"You too."

We exchanged goodnight wishes and went to our respective rooms.

***

After parting ways with Hoyeon, I sat in my room, reflecting on what I'd done so far.

Anastasia had started avoiding me for some reason. Iris was still at the "acquaintance" level.

Camilla and Exipri stuck together like glue, and Camilla made it her mission to keep me away from them.

Camilla once said, "Never trust men who give you sweets," while glaring at me like I was her mortal enemy.

I sighed. This world was way too different from the original story.

I don't think they outright disliked me.

Was it because of Hoyeon? I wasn't sure about Camilla or Exipri, but after Anya asked Hoyeon some kind of mysterious question, she started giving me sharp, unfriendly looks.

It wasn't impossible to resolve, but it didn't seem like something I could fix directly.

Of course, there was no need to force a "favorability route" at this point either.

In the end, if I progressed with the main event, everything would naturally fall into place.

But just sitting around and doing nothing felt like a waste of time, so I ended up trying different things here and there.

In the end, it all amounted to nothing. Looking back, it was a pointless waste of effort.

I had been steadily building my friendship with Hoyeon, but there hadn't been any decisive moments that could change the nature of our relationship.

It always felt like she was about to cross that line, only for her to immediately label it as "just friends" and create this weird, intangible distance. So, for now, we were still just close friends.

Honestly, expecting her to cross that line so soon would have been strange.

The fact that I was even thinking about "clearing" her route in under a month was already weird in itself.

As I mulled it over, I started thinking about the upcoming event in two days.

The survival test in the mountains.

Unlike typical exams in academy stories, no one died or suffered major injuries.

Well, that was only true in hindsight.

The key to its "safety" was a magical tool.

It was a high-performance magical device that would instantly teleport the wearer to a field hospital near the mountain if their life was in danger.

There would also be priests and even Georg himself on standby, so no one would die, no matter how bad the situation got.

Even if a wild animal attacked someone and bit into their neck to the point where their spine was exposed, or if they fell down a cliff and broke their legs, they'd be instantly healed before they could die.

I tried to recall what had happened in the original story.

Camilla had missed her chance to part ways with the protagonist, a commoner, and ended up having no choice but to stick with him. Thanks to the protagonist, she overcame the dangers of the test and even scored a perfect mark on her practical exam.

She didn't know which water was safe to drink or how to start a fire, but she managed to survive solely thanks to the protagonist, which became the catalyst for her growing feelings for him.

But for some reason, she didn't seem to like me very much in this version of events.

Still, I decided that this upcoming event would be my chance to take the first step toward the harem route.

With that resolve in mind, I drifted off to sleep.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 47

Chapter 47: Midterm Exam (2)

As expected, it was so easy it made me yawn. Since I'd already mastered every subject, I had enough time to finish all the questions and still get some rest.

I wondered how Dogeon had done. Judging by how he'd been racking his brain during the test, he probably did alright. Based on how quickly he picked up on math, I doubt he'd bomb it.

At least, he wasn't as hopeless as someone like Anastasia. Even Ethan, the golden-haired kid, seemed to have handled it just fine.

Speaking of that guy, I still couldn't figure out what that coin-like thing of his was. It wasn't really a coin — it had way too many elaborate decorations for that.

It also had traces of divine power.

Maybe I got more irritated than I should have because of the divine power that radiated from it.

Unlike any divine power I'd felt before, this one had swept through my body.

…Well, no point in thinking about it now.

He hadn't done anything to bother me since that weird incident, so that was that.

If he'd continued being a pain, I would've had to deal with him, but aside from the occasional glance, he didn't do much of anything. No point in dwelling on it.

"The test is now over. Students, please put down your writing utensils and place your hands on your laps. Students in the back row, please collect the answer sheets from the front and ensure yours is on the bottom."

It's already over, huh? It's bound to be a perfect score.

I don't know how high the academic standards are here, but it's not like it could be harder than the college entrance exam from my world.

"How did you do?" I asked Dogeon, my voice low to match the quiet murmuring of the students around us.

"…Hard to say," he muttered.

Judging from that response, he probably made a few guesses. If he got it wrong, I could tease him a bit, but honestly, I'd rather he got it right.

No matter what anyone says, he's my friend for now.

His gloomy expression during lunch wasn't promising, so I figured he probably didn't do too well.

"…By the way, this exam schedule is absolutely insane."

"Agreed."

Seven straight periods of testing. It was ridiculous.

The schedule didn't seem to account for the students' ability to concentrate at all. On top of that, the lineup of subjects was clearly designed to mess with us.

They had a non-memorization subject placed right before lunch to rattle students' focus, and then they saved math for seventh period — right when

students were on the verge of mental collapse. Who thought this was a good idea?

Probably someone like that devil, Georg.

“Regardless of your grades, you worked hard,” I said.

“You too, Hoyeon,” Dogeon replied.

“Pfft, what hard work? Twisting a kid’s wrist would’ve been harder than this.”

“…Right.”

He gave me a blank, unimpressed look. Seriously, should I have just lied and said it was difficult?

But it was true. Dealing with actual kids would be harder — more so emotionally than physically.

I shrugged, thinking about the physical test we’d have tomorrow.

If I asked the gods for help, I could probably build a house and live in luxury with a snap of my fingers… but that would be cheating.

I’d been camping with my father a few times, so I had a basic idea of how to handle it. If I approached it with a “starting from zero” mindset, I’d manage somehow.

“See you at dinner,” Dogeon said.

“Leaving already?”

“Yeah, I’m tired.”

He’d looked like a zombie for a while, so I felt bad about keeping him here.

I couldn’t do much to help him, but I could at least offer him a few words of encouragement.

“Then go ahead. You’ll be fine. Whether it’s today’s test or tomorrow’s, I’m sure you’ll do well. Don’t worry too much.”

“…Yeah.”

His face still looked exhausted, but at least he smiled a little. It suited him better that way.

***

Iris despised Stefania. If she had the means, she’d kill her on the spot.

But now, Iris was clutching at Stefania’s feet, desperately begging for mercy.

“I-I’ll become your personal maid instead! Please, just don’t do this…!”

“That won’t do, Iris. Didn’t you already reject that offer?” Stefania replied coldly.

“Ah… Aaaah…”

The reason for Iris’s despair was simple: Stefania had arranged for her to be placed in the same survival group as Hoyeon during the physical test.

After striking a secret deal with Georg to supply him with live demons, Stefania had gained the authority to supervise the field and even interfere with team assignments.

Her original plan had been to use the demons to wipe out the church during the second semester’s final exams.

But that plan had been exposed, forcing Stefania to rely on monsters and beasts instead of demons.

Iris was part of Stefania’s backup plan.

If Hoyeon were attacked by monsters or beasts, Iris would be there to protect her from harm.

Not that Stefania intended to use Iris as a meat shield.

Instead, Stefania handed Iris a small object.

"…Here, a gift for you. Keep it on you at all times, and stay right next to Hoyeon. If you succeed, I'll reduce your family's debt."

It was an amulet that repelled monsters.

Handcrafted by Stefania herself, it was powerful enough to drive off even A-rank beasts and monsters.

Of course, Iris didn't know any of that. She just assumed Stefania was mocking her again — tossing her a trinket before forcing her to stay near the terrifying girl.

But Iris had no choice. The promise to reduce her family's debt was far too tempting to refuse.

"…Why? Why are you doing this to me?" Iris asked with a mix of frustration and despair.

"Why, you ask? Because I trust you, Iris. You'll do well this time too, right?" Stefania said with a sweet smile.

To Iris, that smile looked like the face of a demon mocking her.

***

The Next Day…

"Nice to meet you all. Surely, none of you are dumb enough not to know my name."

Only Georg could talk like that to the children of nobility.

Wearing a red octagonal cap, shorts, and a white tank top, he didn't look anything like a professor or a magician. But nobody dared complain.

"Enough with the chit-chat. I'll be blunt. Starting now, you'll spend five days surviving on this mountain with randomly assigned teammates. Your only provision is the safety device."

As expected, the students erupted into murmurs and whispers. But Georg, unfazed, continued his explanation.

If you're in a life-threatening situation, the safety device will activate and teleport you to a nearby field hospital.

Weapons and tools are allowed, but no food or water.

You may do whatever it takes to survive for five days — even steal from other teams.

"Just because you have noble blood doesn't mean you're safe from hunger and thirst. The same goes for wild animals and beasts. This test was designed to strip away your comforts and teach you something valuable. That's it for the explanation. We'll now begin assigning teams."

This part was just like the original story. The wild chatter of the students and Georg's madman-like behavior were spot on.

But something went wrong the moment the names started being called.

"Camilla, Exipri, Daniel, Kariot."

My name wasn't in Camilla's group.

Then what about the event?

Before I could figure out what was going on, Georg continued calling names without mercy.

Even Cecilia's name was called, but she wasn't in my group either.

So… who is in my group?

“Iris, Baek Hoyeon, Anastasia, Han Dogeon.”

The moment I heard it, I knew something was off. This was a completely different team from the original.

It wasn’t that the other names mattered that much, but not having Camilla on my team was a big change.

“Oh, we’re on the same team! And Anastasia too!” Hoyeon exclaimed.

“…Yeah, we are.”

“…Why do you look so disappointed? Do you not like this team?”

It’s not that I disliked it.

If I thought about it logically, having three heroines in my team was actually ideal.

But that wasn’t the problem.

The issue was that the main event had deviated from the script.

This change could snowball. I might not even get the chance to trigger certain key events later on.

“I’m just nervous,” I said. “I’ve never done camping before.”

“Ah, I see. Don’t worry! I’ve done it with my father before, so I’ll make sure we don’t starve!” Hoyeon declared with confidence.

She had no idea how much more complicated everything had just become.

I wondered if she had any idea what I was thinking as I watched Hoyeon make such a confident declaration.

Her mother, her very existence — everything about her was complicated.

Once Anastasia and Iris had gathered, a figure who appeared to be a supervisor approached us.

…Why are you here?

“Nice to meet you. I’m Stefania, the on-site supervisor for this test. Please make sure to put on these bracelets, everyone.”

Stefania?

Why is she here?

Stefania wasn’t supposed to get involved until at least the end-of-semester exams. Why was she showing up now?

I had no idea what was going on. The shock of the team assignments being completely different from the original was already enough, but Stefania stepping onto the stage so early shattered all my expectations.

It felt like my understanding of this world had been utterly wrecked.

Will I really be able to reach a happy ending?

“You’ve probably heard the instructions, but I’ll repeat it just in case. If your bracelet is damaged, you’ll be automatically disqualified from the test. So be careful. Oh, and Hoyeon? They’re still waiting for you, you know?” Stefania said with a sweet but subtle sharpness in her voice.

“…Understood,” Hoyeon muttered.

Her earlier triumphant expression was nowhere to be seen. Her face was now dark with unease.

What could have happened while I wasn’t watching?

I’d been confident I could control the situation, but now, I wasn’t so sure.

For a brief, very brief moment, a serious thought crossed my mind: Wouldn’t it be smarter to just win Hoyeon over to my side and ensure my

own survival?

But I shook off the thought right away.

If I was going to give up, I'd do it in the second semester.

It's not time to quit yet. There's a saying, "No matter how you get there, as long as you reach Seoul, it's fine." The process doesn't matter as long as the outcome is good.

Alright, time to come up with a plan.

For now, I should work on raising the favorability of Iris and Anastasia.

Hoyeon could be handled later. I could win her over anytime.

"Is everyone wearing their bracelets? Great. Then I wish you all the best of luck. It might feel a bit dizzy, so I recommend closing your eyes," Stefania said with a sly smile.

The moment she finished speaking, a whirlpool of mana swirled around us, wrapping us in its embrace. The world around me grew distant.

Here we go. The test begins now.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 48

Chapter 48: Midterm Exam (3)

As Stefania instructed, I closed my eyes and counted to ten.

When I opened them, I was standing in a forest I'd never seen before.

I glanced around, but there was no one in sight.

…Of course.

There was no way an academy-style test would proceed without a hitch.

"Is anyone out there?!"

Just in case, I shouted into the distance.

"Hoyeon! Are you there?!"

***

…Unexpectedly, I heard Dogeon's voice. I perked up my ears and listened carefully. The sound of several footsteps was headed in my direction.

Most likely, it was Anastasia and Iris.

It seemed like those three were teleported properly. So why was I the only one thrown into this remote area?

Well, at least I wasn't too far away from them.

Taking solace in that, I walked toward the sound of footsteps at a leisurely pace. Soon enough, I spotted Dogeon and the others.

But something didn't sit right.

Why is that guy talking so casually to me in front of everyone?

I never gave him permission to do that.

"Hoyeon!"

Seeing Dogeon's relieved face as he called out to me, I could tell he must have thought something had gone wrong when I didn't appear with them after the teleportation.

"Don't worry, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine. But I don't recall ever giving you permission to speak to me so casually."

"…Ah, about that. I figured, since this is a survival test, it'd be better if we dropped formalities and focused on working together as equals."

Ah, so that's it. Rather than worrying about formalities and risking complete failure, he wanted to prioritize survival.

It's a reasonable argument.

For a brief moment, a cynical thought crossed my mind: Is he using this as an excuse to get closer to the girls?

But it was probably just my imagination. Dogeon was the type to take exams seriously.

"…Alright, fine. Did Anastasia and Iris agree to this too?"

Even if I was going to drop my imperial tone, I had no intention of discarding my dignity or proper decorum, especially in front of others.

"Y-Yes… But I prefer speaking formally, so…" said Iris in a reserved tone.

“I… I agreed with him. Y-Yeah,” Anastasia stammered, looking a little flustered.

So, they all agreed.

“Alright, let’s set our priorities. First, we should find a water source and a place to stay. Does anyone have a different suggestion?”

No one objected.

It wasn’t like I’d said anything unreasonable.

Anastasia stayed quiet, probably because she didn’t know much about camping.

Dogeon had agreed with me, so I understood his silence.

But why is Iris trembling like that?

In the end, we decided to follow Dogeon’s plan.

***

“Here.”

“…Huh?”

“Hold hands. If anyone gets separated in a place like this, it’ll be a huge hassle to find them.”

Wasn’t it obvious? If someone got lost, they’d have to scream for help, which could attract wild animals or enemies. It was much safer to avoid getting separated in the first place.

Since we’d already agreed to be more practical, I reached out to take Anastasia’s hand.

But the moment I tried to grab it, she flinched back like a startled kitten.

“H-Hoyeon! N-No matter the situation, you shouldn’t just grab a man’s hand like that!”

…Seriously?

I know some people think holding hands with friends is embarrassing, but this is a survival test. Was she seriously thinking about etiquette in a situation like this?

“This isn’t the time to be picky about that,” I said, shaking my head.

I turned to grab Iris’s hand instead, but she had somehow slipped behind Anastasia, using her as a shield.

So, it’s two teams of two now, huh?

That’s fine.

I noticed Dogeon looking at me with a bewildered expression, but I didn’t care.

He may not be my younger brother, but I’d teach him everything he needed to know about survival — like a proper big sister should.

With that resolve in mind, I grabbed Dogeon’s hand and led him forward.

***

“Hoyeon, where are we going?”

“Follow me. I heard the sound of water over there.”

I’d heard it while focusing my ears earlier. Alongside the sound of Dogeon and the others’ footsteps, I’d picked up the faint noise of flowing water.

It wasn’t much, probably a small stream, but it would be good enough for drinking water.

“H-Hoyeon… Are you sure? I’m pretty confident in my hearing too, but I don’t hear anything like that…” Anastasia muttered, looking unsure.

She sounded anxious.

Well, I suppose if someone suddenly claimed to hear water and started running off, I wouldn’t trust them either.

But I was sure.

If there was one thing I could trust, it was my hearing.

“You don’t need to worry. I’m certain.”

Hearing my firm conviction, Anastasia hesitated for a moment, but she followed.

Good. I knew she’d trust me.

We walked in the direction of the water sound, pushing through the undergrowth. Before long, a valley opened up before us.

It’s even better than I expected.

Instead of a small stream, there was a proper creek. It was large enough for us to bathe in if we wanted.

“…It’s real,” Anastasia muttered, astonished.

“Of course it is. Do you think I’d lead you somewhere pointless?”

She must have assumed I’d made it up. She needed to trust me more, just like Dogeon did.

He followed me without a single complaint, after all.

“…Well, I guess that’s one goal checked off. We’ve got water,” Dogeon said with a smile, clearly satisfied.

Having a competent teammate like me must have felt like a blessing.

“Praise me,” I said, looking directly at him.

“W-What? Out of nowhere?”

Dogeon blinked, clearly confused. Does he not understand how this works?

When someone does something right, they should be praised. Isn’t that common sense?

“Come on, hurry up,” I said, swatting his leg with my tail like a cat demanding attention.

After a few swipes, he finally caught on.

“…You’re amazing, Hoyeon. Seriously, you’re the best,” he said, clearly flustered.

As he should.

***

I glanced at Iris. She’d been oddly quiet for a while now.

Was she thirsty?

After I said the water was safe, she crouched by the creek and started drinking.

But something was off.

Every time our eyes met, she quickly looked away.

What’s with her?

It wasn’t like I’d done anything to make her avoid me.

The only time we'd interacted was on the first day during lunch, so unless some weird rumor had spread about me, I couldn't think of a reason.

…Then again, this place is crawling with snobby nobles.

Since I didn't exactly make a graceful entrance to the academy, it wouldn't be surprising if some strange rumors had been spreading.

I'll deal with it later. The test comes first.

And no, it's not because I'm scared of finding out what the rumors are.

To be honest, I hadn't expected much from Hoyeon.

First of all, her father was a warrior, not a survivalist. On top of that, she admitted she'd only learned camping skills by "watching from the sidelines."

When someone says they learned something by "watching," it usually means they have no real experience. It made me think I'd have to handle everything myself.

But she was way more competent than I expected.

She found a water source on her own, built a shelter using branches and leaves, and even managed to catch small animals. I have no idea how, but when she called them over, they just… came to her.

It was like something out of a fairy tale.

Of course, there were moments that left me flustered. She'd suddenly grab my hand, demand praise, or pout like a child if I didn't comply. In the end, I had no choice but to go along with her whims.

Anastasia's glare felt like she was looking at trash, but I tried not to let it bother me.

I figured I might as well play along.

By the time the sun was setting, Hoyeon had done everything we needed for our first day of survival.

Fire. Shelter. Water. Food.

She did all of it. I didn't even get a chance to contribute.

Originally, I'd planned to do at least something to earn points with the group, but… well, this wasn't bad either. It just felt like I was relying on Hoyeon too much, and that left me feeling uneasy.

"…? Why are you looking at me like that?" Hoyeon asked, tilting her head.

"Ah, it's nothing," I replied, shaking my head.

"Hm."

Hoyeon glanced at me suspiciously but didn't press the issue. Instead, she went back to roasting the rabbit over the fire.

The smell of the meat was enticing, but mixed in with it was a faint fragrance I'd smelled before.

It was the scent of her shampoo.

Did she wash before coming here?

But if she'd washed in the morning, wouldn't she have gotten sweaty after moving around all day? So why did the scent still linger?

…Well, it's a fantasy world. Maybe there's some kind of magical shampoo that smells amazing all day long.

In the end, I didn't manage to score any points with the heroines today.

But there were still four days left. That was plenty of time.

"…Dogeon, could I speak with you privately for a moment?"

As I was zoning out while watching the fire, Anastasia suddenly spoke up.

“Sure,” I replied without hesitation. There was no reason to refuse.

I noticed Hoyeon glance over at me with narrowed eyes, but she didn’t say anything to stop me.

I followed Anastasia away from the shelter. We walked for a while, far enough that our voices wouldn’t reach the others.

Then, she stopped and spoke in a low voice.

“Don’t you feel any guilt toward Hoyeon?”

Her words caught me off guard.

What is she talking about?

Was she talking about how Hoyeon had taken charge of all the camping-related tasks?

But Hoyeon had volunteered for that herself. I didn’t ask her to do it.

It felt like she was about to criticize me for being a guy and letting a girl handle all the work.

Anastasia did have some pretty old-fashioned views on gender roles.

“…Hoyeon did it because she wanted to,” I replied.

She had insisted on handling things herself, and frankly, she was better at it than me. I figured it was better to let a capable person handle things than to mess it up myself.

“…You think that’s really what Hoyeon wanted…?! Haah… Forget it. It was my mistake for expecting anything from you, even for a moment.”

Her voice was filled with disappointment as she heaved a heavy sigh.

Wait, what?

This conversation felt off.

I wanted to ask her what she meant, but Anastasia had already turned around and was heading back toward the shelter.

For some reason, I felt like I'd lost points with her.

…This is driving me crazy.

I returned to the shelter, feeling uneasy.

Hoyeon was still roasting the rabbit. It looked delicious, but I didn't have much of an appetite.

"…Not hungry? Does it look bad?" she asked, glancing at me.

"No, it's not that. I'm just not that hungry."

"That won't do. Here, come on. Say, 'ah.'"

"H-Huh? No, that's okay, really…"

"Ah, say it."

Before I could resist, she tore off one of the rabbit's legs and held it up to my mouth. She was looking at me with such determination that I had no choice but to take a bite.

The flavor hit me immediately. It's good.

Anastasia's gaze grew sharper.

I felt it piercing into my back like daggers.

In the end, I never figured out what I'd done wrong. I stayed clueless all the way until bedtime.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 49

Chapter 49: Midterm Exam (4)

"…As I thought, my hypothesis was correct."

Magic reshapes humans into more advanced forms.

While examining the internal organs of a demon who had been dissected alive, Georg realized once again that his theory was correct.

When he was with the hero's party, they killed everything in sight, leaving him no opportunity to study them. But now, he could conduct his research at leisure without any interruptions.

Even now, the muscle tissues were writhing as they responded to physical trauma, attempting to restore the body.

No matter how many times he witnessed it, Georg found the regenerative power to be astonishing.

The chaotic and flawed structure of the human body had been improved in every way, and he confirmed that the bone density had been strengthened to the level of steel. He meticulously recorded his observations.

Although he had spent 40 years creating a workshop that could block the influence of divine power, which reacts violently against magic, he did not consider that time wasted for the sake of his research.

Divine power was the force that "fixes" humans as "humans." No matter how enhanced a body might be, as long as its origin was human, it would

self-destruct in an environment filled with divine power.

Having resolved one of his questions, Georg still had doubts lingering in his mind.

Why does magic only cause these changes in humans?

It wasn't as if other races didn't use magic. Even during his active years, there were elves and beastfolk who used it.

In fact, he had used magic himself for research purposes and in dire situations.

However, neither his body nor theirs had undergone any changes.

And why, he wondered, were his own kin so friendly toward humans, a species far inferior to them?

Seeing his kin grant every request made by humans, Georg had always questioned it. Why are you so kind to humans? he had asked repeatedly.

But he had never received a satisfying answer.

Lastly, why did the goddess create divine power? Why go so far as to introduce this cumbersome force just to "fix" humans in place?

As he concluded that his exploration was far from over, Georg left the workshop.

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When I heard a faint buzzing noise and opened my eyes, I saw Anastasia warming up, swinging her sword as if she had just woken up.

As I watched her, mesmerized by the scattering frost that followed the trajectory of her blade, I thought it was beautiful. Realizing I had woken up, she turned to greet me.

"Ah, Hoyeon. You're up?"

“…Yeah.”

Maybe it was because it was morning, but my head felt foggy.

Now that I thought about it, something like this happened about a month ago…

Ah, right. Mating season. It’s been exactly a month.

At the academy, I could hide it somehow, but if I did anything strange here, it would be social suicide.

“Are you tired…?”

“…No, I’ll get up.”

If Dogeon stayed close to me, I might end up doing something weird. Considering what happened in the locker… I might end up doing something even worse.

“Then… would you like to wash up with me? It might help you wake up.”

“Yeah.”

I had no reason to refuse. I could wake myself up, keep some distance from Dogeon, and—well, I’d get to see Anya’s body, too.

These days, I don’t get overly excited just from seeing a woman’s body… but I still wanted to see it with my own eyes to confirm how big it was.

After all, relying on touch alone felt a bit inaccurate. What happened with Dogeon was in a cramped, dark space, so it probably felt bigger than it actually was.

There’s no way people are that big. No way.

I wasn’t too bothered about washing with water anymore. Unless water got into my ears, I could even say I was starting to enjoy it.

The water level was just right, and the current wasn't too strong. It was a little cold, but it was bearable.

Compared to the water they gave us during military showers, this was practically warm.

How could they charge us so much and give us water worse than what flowed down a mountain stream?

"…Um, Hoyeon? Could you please… not stare so openly like that?"

While I was washing, I kept glancing at Anastasia, which made her speak up, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Well, I was staring pretty blatantly.

But honestly, it was too amazing to look away. Her height was similar to mine, but her proportions were better, her chest was larger, and her face was beautiful.

How could I not look?

Even if nothing was "standing," I was captivated by her beauty. My eyes moved on their own.

"Sorry, you're just so pretty."

"W-What? A-Ah… Th-thank you… You're… you're pretty too, Hoyeon…"

Prettier than you? I didn't say it out loud. I knew it was just polite flattery, but getting compliments still felt nice.

Since she asked me not to stare so much, I decided to settle for sneaking glances while I finished washing up.

I scrubbed under my tail and behind my ears when Anastasia suddenly asked me a question.

"Um… Hoyeon, what… Do you think of Dogeon?"

Her voice was oddly cautious, so I was curious, but the question itself was something typical of girls her age, which made me feel a little let down.

“My dearest friend.”

“…But Hoyeon, you have the kind of body where you could ask for more, don’t you?”

A deeper relationship than friendship… A best friend?

I wasn’t sure why she specifically mentioned my “body,” but I had no intention of asking for anything more. Just having a friend was already a source of happiness for me.

Even if he wasn’t the protagonist and was just a passing extra, I’d still treat him the same.

“I don’t have any thoughts like that. I’m already grateful to have Dogeon as my friend.”

“But, Hoyeon… in your belly…”

Just as she was about to say something outrageous, there was a rustling sound nearby.

The moment we both heard it, we turned our heads in that direction.

There, we saw Dogeon.

Judging by his red face, he had definitely seen everything.

I knew it was too late, but my hands still instinctively moved to cover my important parts. At least the lower half of my body was underwater, so maybe I was safe.

But it seemed Anastasia had a different idea.

Instead of covering herself, she immediately grabbed a small stone from the ground and hurled it at Dogeon with all her strength.

“What are you looking at, you trash─!”

Even though there was quite a distance between them, the sharp crack echoed clearly as the stone struck Dogeon squarely in the middle of his forehead.

Judging by the way mana briefly swirled around Anastasia’s body, it seemed she had used mana breathing techniques to strengthen her throw. That only made me more worried about Dogeon’s condition.

Sure, peeking was wrong, but this was too much.

I tried to approach Dogeon to check on him, but Anastasia grabbed me firmly by the arm, stopping me in my tracks.

“…Tell me, Hoyeon. Are you really okay being used and discarded by trash like that?!”

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It felt like my head was going to split open.

No, it might’ve already cracked.

Considering her strength was on par with Baek Jeongho, it would be strange if I was fine after taking a full-force attack from her.

“____”

I could hear someone saying something, but it wasn’t clear.

I just wanted to lie down like this.

Yeah, I peeked, but still. Almost killing someone over that? Isn’t that too much?

…More than that, when I compared Hoyeon to Anya, she wasn’t really falling behind.

Since Anya and Camilla clearly hated me and I had no real connection with Iris, maybe I should just focus on Hoyeon and have a good life for myself.

I mean, I know who they are, but to them, I'm a complete stranger.

"—Dogeon!"

I heard someone calling my name and turned to see it was Anya.

"Dogeon! Are you okay?! Ugh… I'm so sorry… It's all my fault…!"

Maybe she realized that throwing the rock so hard was excessive, because she was apologizing now.

"…I'm fine. Still alive."

"Dogeon! Are you really okay?"

"Yeah, but could you speak a little quieter? My head's ringing."

It was nice of her to shout to help me come to my senses, but now my ears were ringing.

I'd gotten curious when I saw the two neatly folded piles of clothes by the riverside, and I paid a high price for my curiosity. Next time, I'd resist the urge no matter what.

"Dogeon!"

I heard Hoyeon calling me, so I tried to respond.

But she practically tackled me, pinning me down with a hug so tight I couldn't say a word.

I was already lying on the ground, so when she suddenly climbed on top of me, my chest felt seriously compressed.

Since she was in the same league as Anya in terms of physical strength, it really was hard to breathe.

Her face rubbed against mine as she mumbled, “Thank goodness,” over and over. I barely managed to squeeze out a single word.

“H-Hoyeon… I can’t breathe…”

“Oh.”

She finally realized what was happening and got off of me.

I had just narrowly avoided death, only to face another close call.

“…Can you give me a hand and help me up?”

“Here, take my hand.”

The dizziness had mostly subsided, but standing up on my own was still tough.

When I took Hoyeon’s hand and got to my feet, Anya approached me.

Now what?

“…Dogeon, I’m so sorry for being so harsh! I made an unreasonable assumption…!”

“…Huh?”

With Hoyeon watching from the side, Anya explained everything to me in a calm, step-by-step manner.

She had been pushed by the pressure of her followers and came to confront Hoyeon, only to see her entering my room.

With her limited knowledge of relationships between men and women, she seriously believed that Hoyeon was carrying my child.

So she kept watching and observing us. But when she saw me talking to other girls, including herself, she assumed I had “used and discarded” Hoyeon.

If Hoyeon hadn't directly corrected her misconception, she admitted she might have spent the rest of her life misunderstanding the situation.

"…I'm really, really sorry."

Her face was completely red, and she hung her head low, looking incredibly apologetic.

So that's why she acted that way toward me. She ignored me during club activities and went out of her way to avoid me on the street.

"…As long as the misunderstanding is cleared up, it's fine."

Honestly, I was just relieved it was cleared up now.

"…So, does that mean… I'm forgiven?"

"Forgiven or not, you didn't know better. There's no point in blaming you."

It wasn't like she did it on purpose. She had misunderstood out of ignorance and even got angry on Hoyeon's behalf because she thought I was taking advantage of her. I had no reason to be mad.

So with this, I figured it would be fair to consider my relationship with Anya reset.

"Then, let's start over. Is it okay if I call you Anya from now on?"

"A-Ah… Yes."

"Did I do well?"

As I was talking to Anya, Hoyeon suddenly stuck close to my side.

"Yeah, thanks to you, the misunderstanding is resolved. Thanks."

"Then hurry up and pet me as a reward."

Her body was pressed against mine, closer than was really necessary, and that pleasant scent of hers filled the air again.

She shouldn't have been able to use shampoo this time, so how did she smell like that?

I tried suggesting we find another way to settle it, but she flicked her tail against me repeatedly, making it clear she wouldn't budge.

I had no choice but to pat her head.

Sorry, Anya. Please stop staring at me like that.

Even though the misunderstanding had been resolved, it felt like a different misunderstanding had just been born.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 50

Chapter 50: Midterm Exam (5)

Maybe it was because we were too openly flaunting how leisurely we were living, but while we were eating venison for lunch, another team launched an attack on us.

Of course, Anastasia handled it all on her own, so it ended up being nothing more than a minor incident.

The attackers almost became the attacked instead. Her greatsword had cleaved one of them halfway through before they were teleported away, so they probably survived.

Georg had guaranteed that no one would die from these encounters, so I wasn't too worried.

That's what they get for being so greedy.

Humans can survive for three weeks with just water, but seeing them unable to endure a moment of hunger and charging in like that was just pitiful.

"…Is everyone safe?"

After giving her sword a wide swing to shake off the blood, Anastasia turned to ask us.

"As you can see, we're fine. Thanks, Anya."

"…Anya, you're amazing."

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

It seemed like Iris wasn’t used to seeing this kind of violence, or maybe she was just naturally timid, because she spoke to Anya in formal speech.

If Anya had been born in my hometown, I’m sure the gods would’ve unanimously chosen her as a warrior.

She might have even joined the Imperial Royal Guard and earned a high rank. Her martial skills were on par with my older brother, who was the captain of the guard, after all.

Iris, on the other hand, would probably have been either an offering or a courtesan. She didn’t have any remarkable skills, but she was pretty.

Back in my homeland, the gods decided what kind of person you’d become as soon as you were born. I sometimes wondered what it would’ve been like if they had been born in my hometown instead of this continent.

But this continent lets people determine their own destiny, so it was all just a silly daydream.

“Dogeon, eat a lot. You got hurt, after all.”

Just as Actaeon was transformed into a deer after glimpsing the goddess Artemis naked, Dogeon nearly had his head split open for seeing me and Anya naked.

If Anya had put a little more strength into that throw, he wouldn’t be in this world anymore.

“…Yeah, thanks for being so considerate.”

The venison wasn’t of the highest quality since it came from an old doe that had given birth to many fawns. That’s probably why she obediently approached us when we called her.

Since she had already fulfilled her life’s purpose, she asked us to grant her the honor of becoming the flesh and blood of the “great ones,” so I obliged.

“Iris, you too.”

“Eek… M-Me too…?”

I knew she didn’t like me, but she was still part of our team. When it comes to group projects, you have to carry everyone, even if you don’t like them.

…Still, at least she’s cooperative. Back in college, I had to do the work of four people all by myself.

Even if she wasn’t much help, she made an effort to assist in building the shelter, and while her work was clumsy, she at least tried to help process the materials. That was enough to earn her a share of the meat.

“Th-Thank you…”

She was trembling like a frightened puppy. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant sight.

But even if I told her to relax, I doubt it would help, so I decided to just let it be.

She was fiddling with the pendant around her neck as if she were trying to calm herself down.

Just then, Anastasia returned to her seat and started eating the meat.

It annoyed me that only Dogeon was calling her “Anya,” so I decided I’d start calling her that too.

She didn’t seem to mind. In fact, she looked a little pleased.

“…Then, I’m going to look for herbs to treat Dogeon’s injury. Iris, will you help me?”

After we finished eating the deer, Anastasia offered to gather herbs for Dogeon’s wounds.

“M-Me? I-I suppose I can… Ugh, f-fine. It’s not like anything will happen while we’re gone…”

I think she muttered something under her breath, trying to be quiet enough that Anya wouldn’t hear, but I heard it loud and clear.

I didn’t know what she was talking about, and I didn’t care, so I just let it slide.

Once Iris and Anya left to gather herbs, the only ones left in the shelter were Dogeon and me.

“…So, Dogeon. Who was bigger?”

Anya had punished him, but I hadn’t given him my punishment yet.

I could forgive him for seeing me naked, but I couldn’t overlook him blatantly staring at Anya.

No, it’s precisely because we’re friends that I found it even more infuriating.

I wracked my brain for a way to make him suffer as much as possible and remembered a question I’d seen online in my past life.

“Hey, big bro, who do you think is prettier, me or that girl?”

It’s right up there with, “Who do you like more, Mom or Dad?”

No matter which answer you give, you can’t avoid anger.

If you say, “You’re prettier,” she’ll accuse you of ignoring her beauty to stare at another woman.

If you say, “That girl is prettier,” she’ll tell you to go be with her instead.

Back then, I wondered if it was okay to ask this kind of question, considering Dogeon and I weren’t in that kind of relationship.

But I remembered how my friend back in my previous life had been hit with this same question and didn't know how to answer.

If my goal was to make Dogeon suffer, this was the perfect move.

"W-Well, you see, Hoyeon… I mean…"

The effect was immediate.

Just moments ago, he had been gently nursing his injured head, but now his hands waved frantically in the air as he desperately tried to explain.

But his efforts bore no fruit.

"Like I said… I mean…"

He just kept repeating himself, his mind clearly searching for a solution.

Even my friend, who was a master at social interactions, had been unable to answer this question.

I didn't know how skilled Dogeon was in social maneuvers, but I was confident that he wouldn't be able to answer either.

"…"

In the end, he gave up on repeating himself and fell completely silent.

"Why aren't you answering? You saw with your own two eyes, didn't you?"

With our chests pressed together and the distance between us close enough to smell each other's scent, I glared up at Dogeon, applying as much pressure as I could.

But he remained silent.

Well, I suppose anyone with even a shred of guilt wouldn't be able to answer this question.

Just as I was about to say that I'd let him off the hook since I figured I'd teased him enough, Dogeon opened his mouth.

"…Can I be completely honest?"

"Uh, huh?"

Huh…? This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

***

After living with her for about a month, I'd learned how to read Hoyeon's emotions, even through her otherwise blank expression.

Right now, she is a little sulky.

If she were truly angry, the oppressive pressure she can generate would be much stronger.

Even those wide, unblinking eyes of hers had become a bit cute after seeing them so many times.

But that wasn't the reason I couldn't move right now.

It wasn't because she was using pressure magic or anything like that.

It was because of the content of her question.

"Who was bigger?"

That's a sensitive question for any girl.

Hoyeon was probably punishing me in her own way for seeing her and Anya naked.

She was the type to prefer this kind of psychological punishment over something physical.

I'd seen her use the same tactic when teaching Anya math, berating her with lines like, "With this level of ignorance, you'll ruin your entire family."

The intensity of her words had left me more shaken than having our chests pressed together.

My heart was pounding—not from physical pressure, but from the weight of the situation.

After racking my brain on how to avoid her wrath, I came to a strange conclusion.

Maybe I should just be honest.

"…Can I be completely honest?"

"Uh, huh?"

"Anya was bigger, but your shape was way prettier. You didn't lose in size either."

I had my reasons for saying this.

Hoyeon was surprisingly weak to compliments. She craved praise but would act all bashful if she received it.

So I figured that if I answered honestly while mixing in compliments about her, I might be able to diffuse the situation.

It was a bold, shameless plan even by my standards, but I had faith that Hoyeon would accept it.

"…"

She didn't say anything.

But as I watched, her face started to turn redder and redder.

…Did I mess up?

I was still pressed right up against her, so she wouldn't be able to hit me right away. But just to be safe, I carefully pulled away, creating some distance before dropping to my knees.

"…I'm sorry. That's all I have to say."

I had nothing else to offer.

I'd completely forgotten about Byeolbi watching us from the side.

All I could think was that I hoped whatever punishment she had in store for me wouldn't be too painful.

"…Um, I'm going to… go think for a bit."

But the punishment I had prepared for didn't come.

Instead, Hoyeon left, saying she needed time to think.

I sat there alone, wondering what the right answer had been.

But, of course, no answer came.

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"Haaa…"

My stomach felt tight.

It was probably because of my mating season, but I just couldn't stay calm. I needed to step away for a moment.

That beast of a man… If you mess up, just admit you messed up like a real man and apologize.

Why did he have to add in unnecessary remarks?

He said my shape was prettier? That Anya's were bigger, but mine had a better shape?

He had to be insane.

But what was even crazier was me, for feeling my mood lighten a bit after hearing such a blatantly sexual comment.

I swore I wouldn't make any mistakes during this mating season.

At least nobody else had seen it. If someone had witnessed that moment, I'd have died from embarrassment on the spot.

"Ugh… hnn…"

I took deep, slow breaths to calm my burning body.

Even if it's not because of the mating season, isn't it only natural to feel flushed after hearing something so indecent…?!

"…Heh."

I managed to cool down my overheated body, but I had no idea what to say to Dogeon when I went back.

"Thanks for the compliment?"

"What are you, a sexist pig?"

"Yeah, of course, it's me, you idiot."

"You disgusting little pervert."

Ugh.

I didn't feel bad, but I couldn't just accept it with a smile either. The conflicting feelings had my mind in a twist.

…Fine.

If he wants to act crazy, I'll just act crazy right back.

If I say something between a compliment and an insult, that should do the trick.

After steeling myself, I headed back to the shelter.

Dogeon was still on his knees, in the exact same position as before.

"…Um, thanks for saying my shape was prettier. But…"

I was about to follow it up with "sexual harassment is bad," but I never got the chance.

Because at that moment, the entire mountain was suddenly filled with the overwhelming presence of the gods.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 51

Chapter 51: Midterm Exam (6)

Stefania was strolling through the forest with a lively step.

It wasn't as if she was enjoying a leisurely walk. If she had been, she wouldn't be holding a grotesquely twisted heart in her right hand.

The heart had been extracted from a demon she handed over to Georg. Since she had pulled it out just before giving it to him, it was still pulsating.

Knowing that a demon's heart could regenerate quickly even if exposed to divine power, Stefania had no hesitation in taking it out.

Besides, they were individuals she had already felt the need to "clean up" sooner or later, so she felt neither regret nor guilt.

They should have been more useful while they had the chance.

That was the last thing she said to them.

'If I'm remembering correctly, it should be around here…'

She moved according to her memory and the traces of divine power visible before her eyes.

It was a place far from the testing site, and as such, the proctor had left the area. But Stefania didn't mind since she had made a deal with Georg for precisely this purpose.

‘…It moved?’

For some reason, the spot where the divine power was most concentrated had shifted slightly. But since it was only a matter of a few dozen steps, she didn’t dwell on it.

Well, after being trapped in one place for so long, it’s only natural to want to squirm around and move a little.

That was what she figured.

Stefania brushed aside the sacred relics that had eroded so much they were barely recognizable. She placed the heart on the patch of land where the divine power was most dense.

“To the demon—I offer you this sacrifice. Obey me according to the terms of our contract!”

Reciting words that were more a declaration than an incantation, she stomped on the crimson heart, crushing it underfoot.

The blood that gushed from the heart seeped into the ground, and the atmosphere around her changed rapidly.

Sensing something, the wild animals either fled or lay down, exposing their bellies. The dense divine power in the area was soon eroded by the surging demonic energy.

To Stefania, it only appeared as if the divine power had vanished.

But since she knew it was due to demonic energy, she immediately surrounded herself with the thickest mana barrier she could conjure.

She had seen with her own eyes how exposure to demonic energy twisted the human mind, and she had no intention of letting that happen to her.

—How arrogant of you to behave so insolently under the safety of divine protection.

“Isn’t it you who’s being arrogant here? You dare call yourself a god despite having no followers?”

The being, who had called himself a god, roared furiously, causing the atmosphere to tremble. But Stefania remained unfazed.

A god without believers was nothing more than a remnant.

A fallen god couldn’t even prevent someone skilled from declaring him a demon and forging a one-sided contract.

The most the demon could do was make the air rumble, which Stefania knew was the greatest threat it could muster.

There was no chance of this power dynamic being reversed unless she went insane and deliberately exposed herself to the full brunt of the demonic energy.

—Very well, impudent contractor. You’ve come all the way to where my true form is buried. So tell me, what do you want this time?

“Create as many demonic beasts and monsters as you can at the location I specify.”

—Are you giving me orders now?

While transmitting the location information to the demon, Stefania frowned. The demon’s words annoyed her, so she decided to put him back in his place.

“Oh my, aren’t I the closest thing you have to a follower? If you’re a ‘god,’ then shouldn’t you fulfill the wishes of your worshiper?”

—The only one… Ha. We’ll see about that. For now, I will do as you ask. But next time, you would do well to show a little more respect.

The way he spoke was reminiscent of a gambling addict dreaming of sudden fortune, and Stefania couldn’t hold back the scorn that welled up from the depths of her heart.

“Pfft… Haha… Dreams are free, but you don’t even have that luxury. You lost in the past, and now you’re nothing but a sorry little puppet bound to a human. Stay put and stay quiet.”

After a brief exchange of sharp words, the demon submitted to his contractor’s orders.

***

“…Th-thank you for calling it pretty. But…”

Hoyeon hesitated as if she wanted to say something more but suddenly fell silent.

“But…?”

Curious about what she wanted to say, I pressed her gently, but it was as if she didn’t hear me at all.

“…”

She was gazing straight up at the sky with an unfamiliar expression.

I wondered if something strange had appeared. Maybe a dragon was flying by? I followed her gaze, but all I could see was the clear, cloudless sky.

“…Hoyeon?”

“Sorry, not right now.”

Her face was so serious that I couldn’t bring myself to push her any further.

An awkward silence hung in the air for a while.

Luckily, Iris and Anya came running toward us from a distance. Otherwise, I might have gone outside to do some stretching just to escape the awkwardness.

“Dogeon! Hoyeon! Are you two okay?!”

They had gone off to pick herbs, so I didn't expect them to return so quickly. But as soon as I saw them, I realized something was off.

Anya's body was covered in scratches and cuts, and Iris looked like she had lost her soul, muttering the same phrase over and over.

"Monsters… beasts… Lady Stefania… why…?"

Monsters, beasts, and Stefania.

Ah, damn it.

In the end, it seemed Stefania had done something again.

Knowing Iris had some kind of connection with Stefania, I could guess what had happened just from her words.

Somehow, Stefania had released monsters and beasts into this forest.

"Did any beasts attack you?!"

"No, not yet. Anya, are you okay?"

Her body was marked with blood stains and scratches, so she didn't look okay.

"This isn't enough to be considered an injury. In the north, you don't call it an injury unless bones are broken or skin is flayed."

She said it like it was no big deal, but her face betrayed her pain.

Since I'd learned healing magic while getting beaten up by Georg, I could at least reduce her pain even if I couldn't completely heal her wounds.

"Hold still. I'll heal you."

"…Thank you. About time you did something useful."

That was only because Hoyeon was too competent. Not that I could joke about that now.

“So, what happened?”

“…I don’t know. Suddenly, beasts and monsters started pouring out of nowhere and attacking people…”

I asked for clarification, just in case I had misunderstood, but there was nothing particularly new.

Suddenly, monsters and beasts appeared and started attacking people. There was no sign of the proctor.

So this is why Stefania got herself assigned as the proctor here. But why release the monsters and beasts?

As cunning as she was, she was never one to act without reason.

“…When they saw the church members, they immediately rushed toward them. I only caught a glimpse, so I’m not completely sure, but…”

For some reason, it seemed like she was suddenly trying to purge the church’s influence.

I could see what was going on.

By the time I finished listening to Anya’s explanation, her bleeding had almost stopped.

Her expression also seemed more relaxed, so it looked like the healing had helped.

I glanced over at Iris, but she was still unresponsive, as if she couldn’t hear us. Hoyeon, meanwhile, was still gazing up at the sky.

…No, she wasn’t.

Earlier, she had just been standing while looking up, but now she had sunk to her knees, as if she were praying.

“Hoyeon.”

“…”

“Hoyeon!”

Even when I raised my voice, she didn’t answer. What was wrong with her? Why was she acting like this in such a critical situation?

Staying still like this felt dangerous, so I decided to move. But Hoyeon’s current state made that impossible.

I felt sorry for her, but I had no choice but to grab her and force her to move if it came to that.

The moment I placed my hand on her shoulder, Hoyeon suddenly spoke.

“Dogeon, do you trust me?”

“Huh…? O-of course I do. But, Hoyeon, now’s not the time to be kneeling like that—”

“Then stay right next to me. Bring Anya and Iris here too.”

Her words were completely out of place for how urgent the situation was. Asking if I trusted her, telling me to stay by her side—what was she even talking about?

But her expression was more serious than I had ever seen it before.

More than that, a gut feeling told me that if I didn’t do as she said, she wouldn’t move at all. It was such a strong premonition that I decided I had no choice but to follow her instructions.

“…Anya, stay right next to Hoyeon for a bit.”

“Next to Hoyeon? Sure.”

Anya, who had been moving her limbs to check if the healing had gone well, didn’t hesitate and stuck close to Hoyeon.

The real problem was Iris…

Since she was out of it, talking to her wouldn’t do any good.

“…Pardon me.”

I picked her up in a princess carry. She was as light as she looked.

Worried that Hoyeon might glare at me for this, I glanced at her, but she was still staring up at the sky.

With a strange, unsettling smile on her face.

…Is this really the right move?

I noticed that Iris was clutching something that looked like a necklace in her hand.

The necklace had some sort of intricate magic circle inscribed on it, but it was broken. Holding on to something like that wasn’t going to be any help to her.

She’s still a girl after all, huh.

“Alright, here. Everyone is right next to you now, Hoyeon. Can you get up? If we stay here, the monsters will chase us down. We need to move.”

“No. There’s no need for that.”

“…No need? What do you mean?”

I was about to question her further, but I quickly realized it wasn’t the time for that.

Thud.

Something massive was approaching us.

Thud.

There was no way it was a normal animal.

Thud.

A beast… or a monster.

Thud.

At first glance, it looked like a bear, but it was as big as an elephant. It had two heads, and between them was a third, glowing eye.

"…Guys. Break your bracelets."

If we broke our bracelets, we'd be disqualified from the test and get a zero, but that didn't matter right now. We were on the brink of death — who cared about a score?

And since the release of a beast like this during a practical exam would warrant some kind of compensation, we'd be fine as long as we escaped.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt us."

But Hoyeon, as usual, was saying something completely absurd.

There was no way that thing wouldn't attack us. The beasts you saw at zoos were tame compared to this. Its claws and mouth were already stained with blood.

It was clear as day that it had already torn someone apart. Not even Hoyeon would be able to reason with something like that.

"…Anya. Break Iris's bracelet, and then break yours. I'll break Hoyeon's, and then mine."

“Got it.”

Anya was the only one here I could properly communicate with. Having just one ally was a relief.

The moment Anya snapped her bracelet and Iris’s at the same time, both of them vanished.

Good. Looks like the system isn’t broken.

If it was working, then it was our turn.

I grabbed Hoyeon’s bracelet along with my own, closed my eyes, and yanked with all my strength.

But nothing happened.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 52

Midterm Exam (7)

Just a moment ago, my stomach had been twisting with nerves, making it hard to speak. But as soon as the presence of the “Divine One” spread through the air, all those feelings were shoved out of my mind.

They shouldn’t be able to move in this state…

While studying for the exam, I’d come across passages in the history books about demons and gods. I stayed up all night rereading those parts.

It wasn’t because the content was hard to understand — it was because I just couldn’t believe it.

At first, I was annoyed that gods were described in the same way as demons or self-proclaimed deities. But once I learned about what had happened to them, that irritation faded away.

Since there was no way to kill a god, they were either shattered into fragments imbued with divine power to be transformed into spirits, or they were weakened to their absolute limit and then sealed beneath churches or “sacred grounds” with extreme care.

If I hadn’t been here as a student, I’d have called in the military right away.

…Anyway, once I learned about all that, I deeply regretted ever calling upon a god.

—A god? Are you truly a god?

Just existing must already be a burden on them after going through all that. Yet now, they were active enough to spread their magic power faintly through the atmosphere.

I was worried.

—Oh? I wondered who it might be, and it turns out to be the daughter of Byeolbi. I didn't know you were here. Why are you in such a dangerous place, child?

Strangely, their voices were even clearer than before. Did something good happen to them, or had they regained a bit of their strength?

—I'm currently taking an exam.

No matter the reason, it was definitely a good sign. Since the Divine One had asked, I answered their question.

But "dangerous place"? What were they talking about?

—An exam, you say. What a cruel contractor you must have. To release monsters and beasts in a place like that… Such a wicked woman she is, second to none in her malice.

Based on their words, it seemed that some "contractor" had ordered them to release monsters and beasts into this forest.

I couldn't help but wonder who that contractor was.

—Divine One, may I ask who that contractor is?

"…Yeon…"

—…Regrettably, I cannot say. A clause in the contract forbids it. The contract was already established by that wench before you arrived, so there's nothing I can do. My apologies, child.

Whoever it was, they had to be a terrible person. To enter into a contract on their own without permission — it was the height of recklessness.

—No, please don’t apologize to me. All the blame lies with that so-called contractor.

—Ah, if only that woman had even a fraction of your decency, little one. Very well. I will send a beast that follows my will to where you are. Ride it and get as far from there as possible. A storm of blood is coming.

—Wait, could my friends ride it as well?

—Your friends, you say… It’s not impossible. However, if any of them wield divine power, I won’t tolerate it. Would that be acceptable?

“…Ho…a!”

It seemed I wasn’t the only one who found divine power unpleasant. Fortunately, none of my group members were users of divine power.

—Yes, none of them wield divine power.

—Then it’s settled. It will arrive shortly. Don’t be startled when you see its form.

Even with monsters and beasts running wild in the forest, I wasn’t particularly scared. After all, they wouldn’t attack me.

But now that the Divine One had promised to send a beast we could ride, I felt even more reassured.

That said, Dogeon had been pestering me for a while now.

It wasn’t as if he was getting in the way. Even if thunder and lightning were crashing down around me, I was confident I wouldn’t flinch.

In fact, I should probably thank him. It helped me return to reality.

Normally, after speaking with the Divine One, I’d be dazed for three to five minutes, but since Dogeon had gone as far as to place a hand on my shoulder, I snapped out of it quickly.

“Dogeon, do you trust me?”

As soon as I regained my senses, I asked Dogeon the question. Do you trust me?

I knew that the beast the Divine One had promised would arrive soon, but Dogeon and the others had no way of knowing that.

“Huh…? O-of course I do. But, Hoyeon, now’s not the time to be kneeling like that—”

His answer was a little hesitant, but that was enough for me.

“Then stay right next to me. Bring Anya and Iris over too.”

For some reason, Anya’s clothes were stained with blood, and Iris was completely out of it.

We could think about that later after riding the beast.

For now, keeping everyone safe and uninjured was my top priority. They were my precious friends, after all.

Despite his doubts, Dogeon followed my instructions and brought Anya and Iris next to me.

I decided to let it slide that he was carrying Iris in a princess carry. Given the urgency of the situation, I couldn’t exactly blame him.

The presence of the Divine One grew noticeably stronger. It was clear that they were nearby. That was fast.

“Alright, here. Everyone is right next to you now, Hoyeon. Can you get up? If we stay here, the monsters will chase us down. We need to move.”

As expected, Dogeon was focused on finding a solution, even in this situation.

But this time, it wasn’t necessary.

“No. We don’t need to.”

After all, the “bus” to take us to safety was already here.

“…What do you mean, we don’t need to?”

The ground trembled with a heavy thud, and soon, the beast sent by the Divine One revealed itself. No, since the Divine One had sent it personally, perhaps it was more fitting to call it a “divine beast.”

Though, for something sent by a god, it looked quite ferocious.

It looked like a bear, but larger — the size of an elephant. Its jaws and claws were stained with traces of blood, carrying the faint remnants of divine power.

“…Guys, break your bracelets.”

As expected, Dogeon was thinking of running away.

I mean, if I were in his position and saw this creature without any context, I’d probably panic and try to run away too. It looked like something straight out of a dark fantasy game.

So I wasn’t planning to blame him too harshly. Trusting me 100% couldn’t be easy.

But… I couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt us.”

I knew my words wouldn’t convince anyone in this situation, but since it was a fact, I said it anyway.

“…Anya. Break Iris’s bracelet, then break yours. I’ll break Hoyeon’s, and then mine.”

Looks like Dogeon didn’t believe me after all.

It looked like Dogeon was planning to use the system where breaking the bracelet would result in automatic disqualification and teleportation.

Classic Dogeon move. But seriously, trust your friends a little more, will you?

“Alright.”

Anya tore off both Iris’s and her own bracelet, and the two of them vanished into a swirling vortex of mana.

Seeing that, Dogeon quickly grabbed both my bracelet and his own, tearing them apart with force.

But unlike with Anya and Iris, no vortex appeared for us.

Ah, of course. It’s a classic trope in academy stories — the protagonist’s safety device is broken.

I had no idea why mine was broken too, but it wasn’t uncommon for the heroine’s device to be busted right alongside the protagonist’s in these situations.

Wait, me? The heroine?

…Hmm. I might have to think about that one for a bit.

“…”

Dogeon stared blankly at the two broken bracelets in his hands, completely at a loss.

But soon, he seemed to come up with an idea. He stepped in front of me.

“…Hoyeon, run.”

Oh? A man stepping up to protect a woman? Maybe I should reconsider my opinion of him. At the very least, he has a sense of responsibility.

He stood in front of me, his back to me, with several magic circles forming around him. The sight of him like that… yeah, it had a certain charm to it.

Not that it made my heart pound or anything.

No, seriously, my stomach hurts because I'm imagining myself standing in his place. I'd look way cooler in that spot.

Not because Dogeon looks cool or anything. Definitely not that.

"…Huff… I-it's fine. There's no need to run."

"Anya, run. I'll hold it off somehow and catch up with you. Go, now!"

Look at this guy, putting on a brave front while his legs are shaking. You're gonna give me a stomachache, I swear.

But contrary to his trembling voice, his intent to attack was clearly real.

The magic circles spun fiercely as he prepared to launch a spell.

If he actually attacked the beast like that, it wouldn't end well for him. That thing would fold him up like paper.

And besides, the beast looked like it was getting a little annoyed too.

Time to clear up this misunderstanding.

Also, my stomach ache was getting worse.

I got up from where I was sitting and slowly approached the beast.

"Hoyeon! It's dangerous!"

The beast seemed to understand my intent. It moved slowly toward me as well.

We approached each other step by step. The moment Dogeon couldn't hold back anymore and started running toward me—

-Lick!

The beast licked my cheek.

Of course, since it was a beast with blood still dripping from its mouth, it was pretty much the same as getting coated in blood.

Given its large size, its tongue was equally huge, soaking my entire school uniform in blood.

"…I get that you're happy to see me, but please don't lick me. The blood gets everywhere."

-Grooowl.

When I firmly told it not to lick me, it let out a cute groan and plopped down on the ground.

"…What… is this…?"

Dogeon, who had been charging toward me like he was ready to grab me and run, froze on the spot, unable to believe what he was seeing.

"See? I told you it wouldn't hurt us."

I spoke with a hint of disappointment in my voice.

Dogeon kept glancing back and forth between me and the beast, unable to approach.

Guess I'll have to show him how it's done.

"Lie down."

The beast, which had been sitting upright, lay down on its side as if it understood me.

It was too large to ride on while it was sitting, so I needed it to lie down to climb onto its back.

“…Heave-ho. Dogeon, get on. It’s safe.”

“…Ah. Got it…”

Finally, he was starting to believe me.

Though he still hesitated with each step, Dogeon eventually climbed onto the bear’s back the same way I had.

“Alright, bear, let’s go. Dogeon, grab onto something. It’s gonna be bumpy.”

“Y-yeah.”

Hearing that, Dogeon wrapped his arms tightly around my waist.

…Out of all the places you could’ve held onto, why my waist?!

My stomach ache worsened.

The bear didn’t care about any of that, of course. It started moving forward at a slow, steady pace.

I spent the entire ride on its back, struggling to stay calm as the dull ache in my stomach wouldn’t go away.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 53

Chapter 53: A Story That Doesn't Matter

It was daytime when they rode the beast.

But it was only at night that they could dismount from the beast's back.

Even in an environment where it was hard to concentrate, thanks to the girl giving specific commands to the beast, they could at least be comfortable when resting.

The beast, by striking the bedrock with its front paws to create a resting place for them, and shooting beams from the eyes between its two heads to light a fire, exhaled as if it had done its duty before disappearing into the forest.

Half of the girl's instructions were executed by the beast on the spot, but they didn't even have the strength to marvel at the sight.

The boy was utterly exhausted both mentally and physically due to a series of events, and the girl had used up all her mental strength while suppressing her heated body and giving commands to the beast.

"…Hoyeon, I'll just sleep a little. Sorry, but please."

"Got it, uh. Rest…eh."

Though they had spent a long time on the beast's back, the shelter they made was not far from where they ended up.

With search dogs and magic, they would find them within a day at the latest.

Therefore, the girl let the boy sleep.

Normally, he would have kept watch, but this time, she decided to be on guard.

The girl knew the boy had shown great courage, and she had a hunch it wouldn't take long, which led her to make this decision willingly.

Above all, there was something she needed to do alone right now.

After gathering enough branches right by the river, the girl, who had taken embers from the fire lit by the beast, quickly took off her clothes.

Although she had washed in the morning, being drenched in blood made her want to wash again.

The boy, not feeling the same, fell asleep as he was.

She guessed he was too tired to even think about it.

Though the dried blood turned to dust as she moved, the girl managed to undress and walked into the river with her clothes.

Normally, the water would have been cold enough to make her retreat as soon as she dipped her feet, but her body, in heat, found it refreshing.

Carefully scrubbing her clothes to ensure all bloodstains were gone, she neatly folded them by the fire, then started to wash herself.

The water wasn't deep, so only her arms and legs were naturally cleaned while washing her clothes.

As she meticulously cleaned her body like her clothes, her hand accidentally touched her own crevice.

"…Hic. Hieu…?"

It felt like an electric shock but different, causing the girl to freeze naturally.

She didn't know, but her body was in full heat due to being near a male.

Nothing happened because she was ignorant and the boy was exhausted.

However, unaware of this, the girl deliberately and carefully touched her crevice again.

"…Heu…Huu…"

What she was doing was clearly masturbation, yet she hesitated.

When she was 15, her curiosity about her body and sexual desire led her to masturbate alone at dawn, only to be caught by her mother, leaving a strong trauma.

However, as waves of pleasure struck her mind again, the fear that her mother might be watching vanished from her thoughts.

"Heu…A little, huu… more… more…!"

Awkwardly rubbing her crevice, she naturally moved her other hand to her peak.

It's just washing, she deceived herself, tracing back to a distant memory.

The first naked woman she had seen in her life. And the image of that woman masturbating, which she had watched entranced.

Though the face was now a blur, she remembered the posture vaguely enough to mimic it.

Sitting with legs spread, rubbing one crevice with one hand while pinching her peak with the other in a vulgar pose, the girl could no longer think.

More.

Just a little more.

With unfocused eyes staring into the void, surrendering to her instincts, the girl reached her first female orgasm of her life.

“Hyaaaah…!”

She felt something leave her body, dimly aware amidst the whirlwind of ecstasy.

However, with her lower body submerged, there was no way to confirm.

The hands that had been moving vigorously stopped, and she slumped to her knees, lost in the afterglow before regaining her senses much later.

Realizing her legs trembled not just from pleasure but also from the cold, she staggered back to near the fire.

More collapsing than sitting, she positioned herself by the fire.

As her chilled body warmed up, she could think again, but all she could recall was the earlier pleasure.

A happiness that felt like her mind was flying away, incomparable to her time as a boy.

Though there was a slight bitterness in not being able to feel or give such pleasure, she realized even that thought was being drowned out by pleasure.

Eyes closed tight, one more time?

Despite her body now warm and dry, the naked girl pondered whether to do it again.

After long deliberation, she picked up her clothes and started to dress hastily.

For that moment, she trembled, realizing she had almost become the female who only knew pleasure she so feared.

It was an accident due to being in heat and a special situation, she rationalized, returning to where the boy slept.

She had scattered magic to keep away any creatures, so no beast would approach.

Thus, ignoring her body's call to accept male seed, the girl fell asleep.

***

It was noisy.

Specifically, the sound of dogs barking and people shouting was ringing in her ears.

Who the hell is making noise this early in the morning, she thought briefly. Then, she realized it was Anya's voice.

"Hoyeon! Dogeon! Please… answer me!"

Piteously calling out, I had no intention of leaving things that way forever, so I got up.

I thought I'd be all stiff since I had only laid a piece of grass over the stone floor, but I felt as light as if I could fly.

Huh, why is this happening? There's no way my body would be this lively after just washing and sleeping.

Dogeon slept next to me yesterday too. Why could this be, I thought deeply, and there was only one reason.

…That thing.

I almost got hypothermia without even knowing it, from that.

…If not for that, there's no other explanation, but I didn't want to admit it.

Please, let it be that my body feels light because the heat period is over.

Burying my head in my knees out of self-loathing and shame, a very annoying snoring sound came from beside me.

Dogeon, while sticking close to me despite being covered in blood, was sleeping so well.

It seems he slept well even while I was doing… that.

Feeling annoyed for no reason, I kicked him.

"…Cough?! What, an attack… Hoyeon?"

"Get up. It seems people have come looking for us."

"…Ah, yes."

I changed my tone to that of a princess just to scare him a bit, and even in his half-asleep state, he switched to a bowing mode in that brief moment, which only made me more irritated.

Ah, thinking about getting annoyed makes me even more annoyed.

And what about someone else, huh?

Even with a bad physical state, I managed to give orders to the beast to match the conditions, and he goes to sleep without even saying thank you?

Kicking his calf in frustration, I headed towards where Anya's voice was coming from.

"Ugh… That's too much…!"

"Wake up, and first, wash off the blood plastered on your face."

One side of his face, where he had rubbed against my clothes, was covered in dried blood, making it look like a two-faced mask.

He looked puzzled after hearing my words, then, seeing his reflection in the river, he plunged his head into the water and started scrubbing vigorously.

In less than a minute, he came back looking normal, making me think that washing indeed takes longer for girls.

…Pleasure, too, is supposedly felt much more intensely by girls than by boys.

If it felt that good alone, then together─

My lower abdomen twitched momentarily, but since I hadn't eaten anything from yesterday afternoon until now, it seemed more like my stomach was complaining.

Once we get back to the academy, I need to eat something right away.

Shaking off the weird thoughts from my head, I walked towards the white hair I saw in the distance.

Though Dogeon seemed to be running after me in a hurry from behind, it's his own fault.

"…Hoyeon…?! And Dogeon too?! You're both safe…!"

"Of course. Who do you think I am?"

"…Heh, thank goodness… you're safe… Heh, Anya…"

"You told us to run away…! But you said you'd follow… Wahhh…"

Seeing Anya crying with such a pitiful look while Dogeon comforted her, I, for some reason, didn't like it, so I squeezed myself between them.

"Still, we came back alive, didn't we? And no one's hurt."

"Hoyeon, sniff… how can you say everything's fine in front of a bear…!"

In the end, the three of us ended up in a group hug, with only one person making a fuss, but well.

Since it ended well, I guess that's all that matters.

We returned to the academy with Anya and the people who followed.

TL Note: Rate us on ***NOVEL UPDATES***

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 54

Chapter 54: Invitation

Stefania stared at Georg.

Georg stared back at Stefania.

Although it was something they had already agreed on beforehand, they both understood just how unpleasant and tedious this whole process was.

“Who is more at fault?” and “Who will take responsibility?”

That was why the people dressed in black stood silently around them at a distance from the table.

Crow Court.

A trial where the accused are seated and forced to argue and denounce each other. As emotions escalate, hidden information eventually spills out.

Once everything is revealed, the ones dressed in black, who serve as both jury and judge, decide on the sentencing.

If one party is judged to be more at fault, part of the punishment is shifted from one side to the other.

This malicious method was a well-known form of trial within noble society.

“…Field supervisor. There is consistent testimony from examinees stating that you took no action when the beast attacked the test site. How do you

plan to explain this?”

Breaking the heavy atmosphere, Georg was the first to make a move.

“I was tracking the demon. It was moving through the test site, summoning beasts and monsters as it went. I had to prioritize eliminating it first.”

Stefania spoke calmly as she presented evidence. It included a photograph of a mangled corpse, so damaged that it was hard to recognize, and an envelope containing a twisted, ruptured heart.

“…As you can see, I succeeded in killing the demon. However, it took significant time to accomplish, which is why I was unable to take charge of the examinees at the scene.”

She announced the truth as if proudly boasting to the crowd watching from a distance.

Of course, it was a blatant lie.

“Killing the demon was a commendable effort, Miss Stefania. But prioritizing the elimination of the demon over ensuring the safety of the examinees was quite a disappointing decision. I never expected such poor judgment from a student as clever as you.”

Now that Georg’s attack was over, it was Stefania’s turn to strike.

“If the safety devices had worked properly, there would have been no need for me to guide the examinees. I made my decision under the assumption that the safety mechanisms were already in operation. Considering the unprecedented situation of a beast breaking into the exam, wouldn’t it have been a reasonable decision to immediately call back all examinees?”

“Indeed. Which is why we immediately suspended the exam and gathered all students.”

“Then you must have used the safety device’s forced recall function, correct?”

“Yes, just as you said, that function was activated. Most of the examinees from the west test site returned immediately, except for a few. But since the safety device for the east test site malfunctioned, that’s where this whole mess started.”

“It malfunctioned depending on the region, huh. I doubt it was due to a design flaw, considering it was you, Georg, one of the members of that hero party, who personally designed the device.”

“That’s right.”

“Then why didn’t the safety device at the east test site work?”

“The circuits of the magical tool were damaged by demonic energy. Under normal circumstances, it would have withstood it. But the demonic energy in the east test site was so dense, it was as if a real demon had descended.”

Georg parried Stefania’s attack as he pulled out a file and tossed it onto the table.

“Here are the results of the soil and air quality analysis at the east test site, along with reports from the medical team that treated the examinees. Take a close look.”

He lifted each page of the file and floated them in the air, allowing the people dressed in black to view them one by one.

“The analysis revealed levels of demonic energy that would be fatal for a human being. It was strong enough that a person could succumb to demonization in a matter of minutes. Several examinees showed signs of demonic energy contamination and possible demonization, which has significantly complicated treatment efforts for the medical team.”

“Of course. In such an environment, it would be inevitable for the device to fail. After all, everyone knows that demonic energy pollutes mana. Honestly, it’s impressive that the tracking function was still operational. Thanks to that, all missing persons were found.”

“Indeed.”

While pretending to attack each other, they subtly defended one another. Having said what needed to be said, they scanned their surroundings.

Some were busy scribbling down notes, wearing irritated expressions, while others remained expressionless, quietly assessing right from wrong.

No one spoke it aloud, but they all knew.

They had succeeded.

We didn’t have any incidents like that around us, but apparently, the number of dead was more than you could count on your fingers and toes.

It wasn’t in the triple digits, but if you included those who were maimed, about half of our class had been “lost.”

…I wonder if the kids in my class are okay.

Even though I wasn’t particularly close to them, it would be pretty depressing to walk into the classroom, only to see flowers laid on a desk in their memory.

If you’re wondering why I don’t know how my class is doing, it’s because the academy gave us a week-long break after the weekend due to the incident.

It’s not exactly something to be “grateful” for, but it did give me a chance to actually enjoy the weekend.

If the exam had gone as planned, we would have been sleeping outdoors for the weekend and gone straight back to classes the next day.

But honestly, all I did was roll around in bed.

To defend myself, after everything I went through, I think I deserve to lounge around a bit.

Even Dogeon was sprawled out and exhausted since he got back yesterday.

Since I arrived at the academy, I hadn't had the chance to lay around and relax like this.

"…Huaaah."

Plus, I haven't had much alone time recently.

On weekdays, I was busy making problem sets for the kids, and on weekends, I went out with Dogeon.

…The whole river incident doesn't count. That's not what I meant.

Just when I thought I might be able to laze around for once, someone knocked on the door, as if to shatter my hopes.

Who is it? What a bother. I wish they'd just leave.

"…Are you asleep?"

It wasn't even a voice I recognized, so I didn't feel like answering.

I was about to get annoyed when something was shoved through the mail slot.

Huh. What's this? A letter for me?

I'm not expecting anything. It's not a tax notice or something, right?

There's no one from my hometown who would send me a letter. My parents would be the only ones, but they know about my diary, so it wouldn't be from them.

Besides, my mom told me a week ago that my dad was still at war, so it's definitely not from him.

Now that I think about it, I did tell my mom about the physical exam but left out the incident at the river. She said as long as I was having fun, that

was good enough.

I did get to show Dogeon my “cool” side, so I guess I did have fun…

…But seriously, who sent this?

Anxious thoughts filled my head. I half-expected it to be some creepy stalker.

But when I checked the sender’s name, I sighed.

Stefania.

I did feel a little bad for ignoring her for a month, but I figured she would have given up by now.

“Ugh.”

But when I opened the letter and skimmed it, it was different from what I expected.

“To all first-year students, We’re throwing a party to lift everyone’s spirits after such a big ordeal. Feel free to come if you want!”

…

They’re throwing a party even though people died.

I never really understood nobles, but maybe it’s one of those “smile through the pain” sort of things.

I’m not going.

If Stefania had sent it just to me, I might have gone out of guilt. But this was just a mass invitation. No one would notice if I didn’t show up.

The party was in six days, but I wasn’t going.

That day, I figured I'd either hang out with Dogeon or just laze around and do nothing.

Of course, for now, I had to wake up that lazy bum and head out for breakfast.

Judging by the loud snoring I heard from his room last night, if I didn't wake him up, he'd probably stay in bed until 1 or 2 in the afternoon.

I could've worn casual clothes instead of my uniform, but if I was the only one in an outfit with an eastern vibe, I'd stand out too much. So, I just went with my uniform.

Besides, it's more comfortable.

By now, it had become a habit to casually open Dogeon's door without knocking. As expected, he was lying flat on his back, completely sprawled out in the same clothes he wore yesterday.

"…Get up."

When I tickled the tip of his nose with my tail, he let out a loud sneeze and sat up.

"Who… huh? Ah, Hoyeon… is it already time for breakfast?"

This guy… At some point, he started treating me like his personal breakfast alarm clock.

Looking at the sad state of his room, my eyes naturally wandered to the front door, where I spotted a familiar-looking letter.

Dogeon was still half-asleep, his mind foggy with drowsiness. Curious, I checked to see if it was the same letter I'd gotten earlier.

Yep, it was. Not a single character was different.

…Hmm. If Dogeon and I both got one, then Anya probably did too.

Come to think of it, I've never attended a party with friends in my entire life.

If I didn't go now, when would I ever get the chance? Going with the three of us didn't sound like a bad idea.

"Hoyeon, that letter you're holding… Isn't that for me?"

"Yeah, it is."

"…Then why are you the one looking at it…?"

We're friends, aren't we? Isn't it normal to do that sometimes? It's not like it's anything important — just a mass-invitation letter sent out to everyone.

"It's nothing special. I just wanted to check if it was the same invitation from that annoying girl inviting all the first-years to her party."

"Annoying… girl? Hold on, let me see that."

"Here."

Dogeon, still looking like he hadn't fully woken up, squinted at the letter. As he read through it, his face gradually turned more serious.

"…This is from Stefania!"

Ugh. What's with him getting all worked up?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 55

Chapter 55: Go buy some clothes

“…So that girl is supposed to be such an extraordinary woman, huh?”

“I’m telling you, she is.”

While eating lunch, I asked him for information about Stefania, and, as expected of the protagonist, he told me a bunch of things.

Rumors about how, if she gets upset, she uses her connections and money to crush people. Or that at night, she becomes a total “extreme S-queen.”

Apparently, her magic skills are already on par with the Tower Lord, and there are even rumors that she’s connected to demons. Not a single good rumor among them.

“…As you saw for yourself, that gentle-looking face of hers is just a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“Hmm.”

It didn’t seem all that dangerous to me. It’s not like she’s openly going after people, and honestly, I have way more money and connections than she does.

Even if she’s connected to demons, I doubt it goes deeper than my connection. After all, I know that demons are actually gods.

I wasn’t scared at all.

It’s not like I’m looking down on her just because I was intimidated during our first meeting.

It’s just… how do I put it? Her presence had this overwhelming aura that made it feel like she could crush people.

It would be rude to compare her to my father and mother, but if I think about it the other way around, it’s kind of amazing that a mere girl could remind me of those two, even for a moment.

But in the end, she wasn’t that big of a deal. I got scared for nothing.

“Anyway… are you planning to attend the party that girl is hosting?”

“Yes, I have to. It’s called an invitation, but it’s more like a threat to come.”

So he was going to go.

If Dogeon was going, there was no reason for me not to.

To be honest, I was kind of hoping he’d suggest we just hang out somewhere else together instead, but this works too.

I was really curious about what a party would be like.

Of course, part of the reason I’m going is to keep Dogeon from ogling other girls.

“If that’s the case, I’ll go too.”

“Ah, but someone like Hoyeon doesn’t really have to go, you know…”

“I said I’m going, didn’t I? Stop complaining.”

Judging by Dogeon’s slightly annoyed expression, he was definitely planning to flirt with other girls.

If he didn’t have a friend like me to keep him in check, he’d probably end up fooling around with all sorts of girls and then one day turn up as a corpse

in a river somewhere.

Sure, he's the protagonist of a harem story, so that probably wouldn't happen, but… well, this isn't a novel. It's real life, so who knows?

"Yessir. By the way, do you have something to wear?"

"…Clothes?"

"Yes. Don't tell me you're thinking of wearing your school uniform to the party…?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I was planning."

With a loud smack, Dogeon slapped his own face with his palm.

What's the big deal? I'll wear what I want to wear.

"…Have you ever heard of something called a 'dress code' or 'attire rules'?"

"Of course. You wear a school uniform at school, and you wear black clothes at a funeral. Isn't that what you mean?"

Does he think I'm an idiot or something?

"…Yes, you're absolutely right. Just like you shouldn't wear flashy clothes to a funeral, and just like you're supposed to wear the academy uniform at school, for a party, you're supposed to wear a dress or formal evening wear, Hoyeon…"

…For real?

It's just a party hosted by some student, right? We have to dress up for that?

It's not that I'm being stingy with money or anything… It's just that I couldn't imagine myself in a dress.

Back in my hometown, I did wear those annoying formal clothes for official events, but they weren't revealing like dresses, and since the events were serious, I didn't really complain.

But this is a kids' party. Do I really have to go all out with fancy clothes for something like that?

"…So, to confirm, you do have clothes to wear, right?"

Ugh.

"…I don't."

"I thought so… sigh. Never mind, let's just go buy some clothes first."

This cheeky guy was definitely about to say, "I knew it," just now, but held back at the last second.

But, well, it's true that I don't have any clothes, and Dogeon was looking at me with such a pitiful gaze that I couldn't even argue.

I mean, so what if I don't have a lot of clothes? Does he have to look at me like I'm some kind of poor beggar?

Even my mother, when she gazed down at the people of the empire, didn't show this much pity in her eyes.

"…Anyway, let's go. Looks like we're done eating. But before we go shopping, let's stop by your room and Anastasia's room."

Without a word, Dogeon headed to the dish return area.

The reason I wanted to go to Dogeon's and Anya's rooms was simple — to check their wardrobes.

Since Dogeon was a social butterfly, he might have some fancy clothes lying around. But Anastasia, a classic "outsider," definitely wouldn't have a dress meant to impress anyone.

It didn’t mean much, but I just wanted to confirm that I wasn’t the only one with a sparse wardrobe.

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“…No way… Anya… how could you…?”

“H-Hoyeon? Why… What’s wrong?”

Hoyeon stood in front of Anya’s open wardrobe, staring at her with disbelief.

It wasn’t just Anya. She had also checked my wardrobe earlier. Back then, she just hummed to herself and moved on to Anya’s room, so I didn’t know what she was thinking. But now, I think I get it.

She was probably comparing her own wardrobe to ours.

Since her only real friends were me and Anya, it seemed like Hoyeon was comparing her own wardrobe with those of the people closest to her.

I don’t know what Hoyeon was expecting, but it seemed like the results were far from what she had in mind.

“Uh… Dogeon? Why is Hoyeon acting like this all of a sudden…?”

“There’s no way… This doesn’t make any sense…”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure, but I think she’s comparing her wardrobe to ours. You got Stefania’s invitation, right?”

“Ah, yes. I was planning to go. Don’t tell me… you’re going too, Dogeon?”

“Yeah. I mean, look who invited us. Of course, I have to go. Looks like Hoyeon had the same idea.”

I explained what had happened earlier. How Hoyeon had seriously planned to wear her school uniform to the party and how, when she said she didn’t have a dress, we decided to go shopping for one.

“…I can see you’re partly to blame, but still… Hoyeon!”

“…Anya… didn’t you say you didn’t have any friends…? Then… why do you have a dress…”

“That’s not the point right now!”

Hoyeon, clearly dazed, accidentally hit one of Anya’s sore spots, but Anya let it slide with just a small outburst.

“…Anyway, Hoyeon. Do you really not have a dress or any kind of party clothes at all?”

Looking hopeless, Hoyeon gave a small nod.

“…Then what do you have in your wardrobe? You have clothes for weekends or outings off-campus, right…?”

“…Three school uniforms. One set of casual clothes from my hometown.”

“…What?”

“…Huh?”

Did I mishear that? Did she just say she only has four outfits in total?

Even Anya, whose wardrobe is pretty sparse for a girl, had more than that. But Hoyeon? It felt like she barely had enough clothes to be considered a functioning human being.

“…Hoyeon, please tell me I misheard you. How can a person only have four outfits…?”

My thoughts exactly. At first, I thought she was messing with us.

Even if you don’t count underwear, that’s way too few. There’s no way a person could live with so few clothes.

But then Hoyeon opened her mouth and said something that left us completely stunned.

“I don’t go outside… I don’t meet people… It’s fine that way…”

We, I, had underestimated her far too much.

“…It can’t be.”

Even if she didn’t have many friends, I didn’t think she was the kind of person who hardly ever goes outside.

Of course, I’ve met people like that before. But even they had at least ten outfits.

Hoyeon’s wardrobe situation was that dire.

“…This won’t do. Dogeon? You said you were going shopping for Hoyeon’s clothes, right? I’m coming with you. Even if I don’t have much of an eye for fashion, it’s better to have one more person’s opinion. Don’t you agree?”

Anya’s eyes were full of resolve, which was a rare sight. She was usually so calm and detached, but this time, it seemed even she couldn’t stay indifferent.

“…You’re right. Come with us. I’m not exactly an expert on women’s clothes, so I was a bit worried. If you’re there to help, I’ll feel a lot more at ease.”

Besides, since she’s also a heroine, there was no reason to refuse.

To be honest, I do know a thing or two about women’s fashion, but since this is another world, I wasn’t all that confident in my knowledge. Having Anya’s help would be a bonus.

“…Ah…”

Like a puppet with its strings cut, Hoyeon lay limply on the ground. I reached down and slipped my hands under her armpits to lift her up.

Normally, I'd be more self-conscious about it, thinking it was too forward, but right now, I couldn't help but think, She can't even get up on her own? So, I didn't feel bad about it at all.

"…Hngh?"

"Pull yourself together. We're going to buy clothes. You're not planning to live your whole life with just four outfits, are you?"

"Four outfits… Yeah, I guess you're right… But can you let go of me now? It… kinda tickles…"

"Ah."

I realized I was still holding her up by her armpits. Her pathetic state must have made me forget.

"…Alright then, let's go!"

For some reason, Anya's face had turned a little red, but I wasn't sure why.

I took hold of Hoyeon's hand, still swaying like she hadn't fully come back to her senses, and followed behind Anya as we headed out of the academy.

"Hoyeon, do you have any idea what kind of style you want?"

"None…"

She was definitely still out of it. Her tone was like that of a princess, but the substance of her words was anything but.

"Then, Dogeon, what do you think would suit Hoyeon?"

Anya, seeing that Hoyeon was in no state to offer an opinion, quickly turned the question to me.

But I wasn’t exactly an expert on dresses, so I gave the only answer I could.

“Hmm. It’s hard to say just by looking at her like this. I think we’ll have to see for ourselves when we get there.”

“I see… So you’re saying we need samples to choose from. In that case, we can rule out the fabric shops… Which leaves only one option… Ugh, I don’t like it, but…”

Anya muttered to herself as if weighing her options before making her decision.

Since she probably had most of her clothes custom-made, she must have disliked the idea of buying off-the-rack.

But no matter how you look at it, Hoyeon didn’t seem like the type to care about fashion, so it seemed like Anya was being considerate of her.

I followed Anya as she confidently led the way to her chosen destination.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 56

Chapter 56: Dress-up Doll

Being dragged around by these two, I realized we'd ended up pretty far from the academy.

Of course, it's not like we'd left the city surrounding the academy, but this was a lot farther than when we went to the pet shop last time.

If that trip felt like walking to the local convenience store, this one felt like going to one of those big warehouse-style stores in the middle of nowhere.

We'd already been walking for about 30 minutes.

My legs didn't hurt or anything, but since we'd gone this far, I started to feel an odd sense of unease. I wondered if they would start to move, too.

When I got permission from Father to attend the academy, he gave me a condition — whenever I went outside the academy grounds, I had to be accompanied by an escort.

Of course, realistically, it wasn't practical to have escorts following me around every single time I left the academy. It would be tiring for them, and I didn't like how it would look, either.

It would seem like I was too dependent on my parents.

So we reached a compromise. Unless I was leaving for an official academy-related reason, I could go short distances without an escort.

Thanks to that, my escorts hadn't been inconvenienced so far…

But this time, I wasn't so sure.

"…How much farther do we have to go?"

I wasn't opposed to seeing the Captain of the Guards, but I didn't want to meet him like this.

He'd definitely ask, "Why are you out here?" If I had to explain that my friends were dragging me around to buy me clothes because they pitied me, I think I'd die of embarrassment.

"Just a bit further… Yes, about 3 more minutes. See that big building up ahead? That's it."

"Hmm, I see it."

Following her gaze, I noticed a large building, so tall it almost matched the height of the giant tree back at the academy.

It looked oddly familiar. It took me a moment to realize why. It looked exactly like a department store from my past life.

Not like a grand, fantasy-style building, but a modern department store.

Honestly, the idea of a department store existing in this world felt more surreal than a magic clock tower with a magically expanded interior.

Of course, I hadn't seen the inside yet, but from the outside, it was a department store. No doubt about it.

It seemed Dogeon was feeling the same way.

He was staring at the department store-like building with a puzzled look on his face.

It made sense. Until now, every building we'd seen, big or small, had that unique "fantasy" style. But this building looked like it had been plucked

straight out of modern times.

…Well, with friends here, I'm sure it'll work out somehow.

"…Sigh, I really didn't want to come here and line her pockets, but… I guess I have no choice."

"Huh? Her? Don't tell me… that building is owned by Stefania?"

Dogeon's mind seemed to snap back to reality as he caught on to Anya's grumbling.

"Yes, that's right. Squeezing a bunch of stores into a cramped space like a chicken coop and flooding the market with mass-produced products… That kind of idea could only come from the Elfelton family."

"…I see."

Judging from her sharp words, it was clear Anya didn't have a high opinion of Stefania or her family.

"Anya, then why are you planning to attend her party?"

"Well… I'm not sure if I should admit this, but… ugh… It's for the tea… she serves…"

…Tea.

It was rare, but Dogeon and I had the same thought at that moment.

She's going to a party… just to drink tea.

"…Please, don't look at me like that. Yes, she's a shamelessly greedy woman, but… she makes good tea…"

Her voice trailed off, and it was clear she was being sincere.

Well, I guess I can understand. I once made a habit of sneaking off to a café during the quiet hours just to get a taste of a particular side dish.

It’s probably the same thing for her.

“Right. Even in the mud, you can still find treasure. I get how you feel, so don’t be too hard on yourself. Come on, let’s go.”

“…Thank you for understanding, Hoyeon.”

How does it feel to be comforted by the friend who just got mocked for having no clothes? I bet Anya didn’t expect to be consoled by me of all people.

Not that I’ve forgiven her.

She still owes me an apology for the whole “lack of clothes” thing.

With a little more energy in her steps, she led us into the building. As expected, it was, indeed, a department store.

There were crowds of people, shops everywhere, and not a single window in sight.

At least there wasn’t any of that random love-song background music playing, so it wasn’t too bad.

“…No matter how I look at it…”

Hearing Dogeon muttering to himself, I could tell he was just as stunned by the sheer “department-store-ness” of it all.

“Well, let’s get started by looking at some dresses.”

After saying that, Anya stepped onto an escalator… and I felt an indescribable emotion.

The way she got on so naturally… It reminded me of going to the department store with my mom as a kid.

Don’t think too hard about it. The escalator is probably some kind of magic device. I gave up on questioning it and followed behind her.

“Alright, Hoyeon. Let me ask you again. You really have no specific style or look in mind, right?”

Anya wanted to be absolutely sure.

Of course, I had no idea. I didn’t even know what “style” was supposed to mean. As far as I was concerned, clothes just had to be sturdy and comfortable.

That’s exactly what the only set of casual clothes I brought from home was like.

No tears, no stains, no lingering smells, and it didn’t restrict my movement. It was the pinnacle of comfortable clothing.

…But I guess wearing something like that to a party wouldn’t be acceptable.

“I’ll say it one more time. I have no such thing.”

I clearly conveyed my feelings and waited for Anya’s response.

“…Alright then, let’s try them all on!”

Huh? How did we end up there?

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“Huh… Is the size measurement device broken? I’m so sorry, customer! Please wait a moment!”

Anya’s grand ambition to dress Hoyeon up in all sorts of dresses faced a major hurdle right from the start.

The problem was the body measurement device had broken down.

The device was supposed to scan the body using mana waves to measure sizes instantly, no need for a measuring tape. But for some reason, it wasn’t working on Hoyeon.

It was as if it couldn't detect anything there — like nothing was standing in front of it — or it spat out completely nonsensical measurements.

"…That's strange. This thing never breaks… I'm really sorry, customer. It looks like we'll have to measure you manually with tape. Is that alright with you?"

"Yes, please go ahead."

Anya immediately agreed before I could say a word. I glanced at her, a little stunned, but the store employee was already approaching me with a measuring tape.

Like a frightened cat frozen in place, Hoyeon quietly surrendered herself to the store clerk's touch. Meanwhile, Dogeon leaned over and spoke to Anastasia.

"…Anya, you're not seriously planning to have her try on all of them, right?"

"Dogeon, what kind of silly question is that? Of course we have to try all of them on. How else are we supposed to pick the best one?"

Dogeon let out a deep sigh from within and glanced over at Hoyeon.

She looked like she didn't know what to do with herself, but she still moved around as needed so the clerk could get her measurements properly.

Dogeon silently offered a moment of prayer for Hoyeon, who was about to be treated like a dress-up doll.

Of course, that didn't mean he wouldn't enjoy the sight. To him, Hoyeon was just as attractive as Anastasia, except for being a little shorter.

But since he also knew how long it takes for women to pick out clothes, he couldn't help but sigh again.

"…Alright, we're all done. Wow, amazing! With a figure like this, you'll look stunning in any of our outfits!"

Half of it was just flattery, but the clerk genuinely believed it. In their eyes, Hoyeon could pull off any style of dress.

“Uh… r-right… thanks for the compliment…?”

“Now then… let’s see… Which outfit would you like to try on first?”

Without hesitation, the clerk handed the catalog to Anastasia.

Hoyeon found it odd. Why is Anya choosing the dress when I’m the one wearing it? But since Anastasia was staring at the catalog with such a serious expression, Hoyeon couldn’t bring herself to say anything.

Anastasia’s eyes darted between the catalog and Hoyeon before she eventually made her decision, tapping on one of the pages with her finger.

“For starters… let’s go with this one.”

The outfit she picked was a halter-neck dress.

It was primarily black, with lace material around the chest, an open-back design, and just enough exposure around the chest to reveal a glimpse of cleavage. For Hoyeon, it was an outfit that packed way too much punch.

But it perfectly fits Anastasia’s philosophy of “start strong from the very beginning.”

“…Wh-what did you just decide on…? Huh…?”

Feeling a rising sense of dread, Hoyeon looked at Anastasia with pleading eyes, but Anastasia only responded with a mysterious smile.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

“Yeah, just relax. It’ll be fine.”

There’s nothing you can do anyway. Those words lingered at the edge of Dogeon’s lips, but he kept them to himself.

He decided it was best to just watch the show. He was genuinely curious to see how Hoyeon would look in that outfit.

When the store clerk entered Hoyeon's measurements into the system, a magical sewing machine powered by mana started whirring to life.

It moved quickly and precisely, stitching the fabric together. As the shape of the dress gradually became recognizable, Hoyeon's face went pale.

"…Anya, what in the world is that…? Is that… supposed to be clothes? That's a dress?"

"Right this way, miss."

"Wait, wait, something's not right. That can't be a dress—!"

Hoyeon's desperate cries echoed as she was dragged into the fitting room.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 57

Chapter 57: The Reunion Was the Worst

“So, what kind of outfit did you put on Hoyeon?”

I had only seen Anya carefully selecting the clothes, but I hadn’t actually seen what she picked out. Well, she always had this aura of “don’t come near me,” though it wasn’t as intense as what Hoyeon had at the start of the semester.

But if I were to nitpick, there was a significant difference between the two.

Anya deliberately projected that aura because she didn’t want to be disturbed.

On the other hand, with Hoyeon, that oppressive energy just naturally seeped out whenever she was in a bad mood.

Even when she wasn’t aware of it, she exuded a vibe similar to—or even more intense than—Anya’s conscious efforts to keep people at a distance.

Thinking about it like that, I was really relieved that Hoyeon was part of “our side” and not aligned with any other faction.

“Ah, right. I forgot to show it to you, Dogeon… Here, this is it.”

“…Anya, are you seriously planning to make Hoyeon wear this? No matter how much it’s a party hosted by Stefania, it’s still supposed to be a consolation party, isn’t it?”

The dress had an open back, exposed cleavage, and side slits. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn't the type of dress you'd wear to a "consolation" party.

Superficially, the event's purpose was to console the first-year students for the hardships they endured, not to have someone show up and sweep people off their feet.

Considering that purpose, it felt a bit off to wear something like this.

Hearing that, Anya averted her eyes, seemingly aware that she had made a mistake, and started fumbling for an excuse.

"That's… well, you see… It's for measuring! Yes, I just wanted to measure Hoyeon once…!"

If I were to organize her rambling into a coherent explanation:

Her plan was to have Hoyeon try on the most daring option first. Then, later on, she could naturally suggest, "Since we tried something bold earlier, how about something a bit more modest this time?"

In other words, she had no actual intention of making her wear it to the party.

Was this some sort of shock therapy or gaslighting tactic?

It was clumsy and ridiculous, but oddly enough, it felt like it might actually work on Hoyeon.

I did wonder for a moment, "So, did she have them make an outfit they wouldn't even buy?" But soon, I sensed Hoyeon was about to come out from inside, so I didn't bother bringing it up.

I figured that must be something nobles do. After all, I couldn't claim to know much about this world beyond the contents of the original story, so I stayed quiet.

“…There’s no way… I could possibly… show myself like this… in front of others…”

“No, no! You’re really beautiful! I’m sure your companions will feel the same!”

“…You’re not trying to deceive me, are you…? Alright, f-fine… I’ll prepare myself…”

Even just looking at the design, anyone could tell it was something a little too much.

Hoyeon, who had to actually wear it, seemed understandably shaken by the experience.

“I… I’m coming out…!”

I had been looking forward to it.

Since Hoyeon, who looked beautiful every day even while wearing only her school uniform and no makeup, was now properly paying attention to her appearance, there was no way I wouldn’t be excited.

…But this was beyond expectations.

“…Why are you looking at me like that…? Say something… ugh.”

It had felt like it was taking a long time for her to change, but now I understood why.

They had matched everything from her shoes to the dress.

Her flat shoes had been swapped for heels, and it seemed she had even changed her undergarments. If she had been wearing her usual ones, they would have shown through the dress, but they didn’t.

If she had only been “pretty” before, now she was stunning enough to seize the gaze of everyone around her.

To the point where it made me wonder, “Would Anya even come close to looking this good if she wore the same outfit?”

Her posture, unlike usual, was slightly hunched as if she were self-conscious of other people’s eyes, and that only made her seem more alluring.

When she noticed that my gaze had momentarily dropped to her cleavage, she tried to cover the lace portion with her hands, but that action only made her look even more seductive.

Her embarrassment was clear as she wrapped her tail tightly around her thigh, a sight so adorable that I found myself momentarily speechless.

“…Ah, sorry. You’re just so beautiful. Anya, don’t you think so too?”

Rather than calling her “pretty,” it felt more appropriate to call her “beautiful.” Rather than “charming,” it felt more accurate to say she was “captivating.” That was the kind of overwhelming presence Hoyeon had right now.

“Yes… I truly think so. Hoyeon, you are absolutely stunning.”

“R-really…?”

Even though she was still somewhat withdrawn, her posture regained a hint of confidence after hearing the compliments.

Compared to her usual demeanor, she was still a bit timid, but it was definitely an improvement.

“Would you mind taking a few steps? If anything feels uncomfortable, please let us know!”

While everyone else was dazedly admiring her, a staff member, who had regained her senses first, spoke to Hoyeon.

“Ah… I understand.”

It was hard to tell whether her awkwardness was due to walking in heels or from being overwhelmed by all the gazes on her. Probably both.

With that stiffness, Hoyeon slowly began walking through the store.

Her movements caused her legs to peek through the slit in the dress from time to time, making it impossible to look away.

Anya seemed to feel the same, as she was fidgeting with her wallet.

That was the kind of movement people usually make when they're about to buy something.

It looked like she was set on buying that dress for Hoyeon no matter what.

Imagining the day when she'd wear that dress at an upcoming party, I burned Hoyeon's image into my memory.

It seemed like my walk home today would be heavier than usual.

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"The young lady is moving around a lot. Lieutenant, what do you think? Do you believe we'll need to step in this time?"

The young man asked the old man as he watched a dot move across a map.

On their heads were animal ears—proof that they were not human.

The young man had the ears of a wolf, while the old man, referred to as the "Lieutenant," had the ears of a bear.

"…This time, it would be better to follow Her Highness, Black Wolf. Unlike before, she's gone too far."

"Even you think so, Lieutenant? Last time, it was just a pet shop, but this time…"

The young man, who could look like a scoundrel or a loyal subordinate depending on how you viewed him, grabbed the sword leaning against the chair next to him.

"…Seems like she's gone to some strange place this time. Not like her to do that."

"Shall I tell the soldiers to prepare?"

"No need. Just me and you, Lieutenant, will be enough. I don't want to drag everyone along and end up getting into a scuffle with the guards. If you're really that worried, we could bring along two people at most."

"…No, if you're stepping in personally, Black Wolf, that's more than enough. After all, you're someone who could handle all of us at once if it came down to it. Besides… Her Highness doesn't seem to be very fond of us, does she?"

The young man chuckled at the old man's words.

What they had done for Hoyeon might have been necessary for her, but it was never in the way she wanted.

The only reason they hadn't killed anyone was because she had firmly ordered them not to.

If she hadn't spoken up, they would have gladly turned the place into a bloodbath just to clear the path for her.

"Alright, let's get moving, old man. Now then… what did they call it again? A department store, right? A weird building that crams all sorts of shops into one place. She's there, isn't she?"

"Yes."

The old man glanced at the map and answered Black Wolf's question.

The map had been drawn using information they had gathered themselves as they scoured the area near the academy. Thanks to that, they knew this

city’s layout better than most of its residents.

They had shed a little blood to obtain that information, but as far as they were concerned, it didn’t matter as long as Hoyeon never found out.

After all, the ones who bled were drifters, beggars, and criminals—people who didn’t contribute much to society to begin with. They genuinely believed they had done something good.

After confirming the shortest route to the department store, the young man and the old man left their lodgings.

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It had been four hours since we got stuck in this department store. There were no windows, but fortunately, there was a clock, so I had a rough idea of how much time had passed.

I had no clue how many outfits I had tried on or how many we had bought.

It felt like there were more clothes in Anya’s shopping bags than there were on the racks.

I used to think the whole “women take forever to shop for clothes” thing was a joke, but now I was learning, through painful experience, that it was absolutely true.

Even Dogeon, who had been helping the whole time, was now carrying bags in both hands, stuffed to the brim.

“…Anastasia, isn’t this enough already?”

“What are you talking about, Hoyeon?! There are still so many outfits left for you to try on!”

Anya, weren’t you supposed to be an introverted shut-in? Is it really okay to treat your friends like this?

Not that I was some kind of saint when it came to handling friends, but still, this was too much.

Ignoring my growing internal resentment, Anya moved with renewed energy.

We had already scoured the entire second floor, so where was she going now?

Ah, the next floor.

Somebody save me, please.

"…Sorry, Hoyeon. I'm starting to feel like I shouldn't have brought you here."

Dogeon's voice was filled with regret.

It wasn't that he lacked stamina or strength, but even he seemed to be nearing his limit.

"…It's fine. Your intentions were good, after all."

With Anya's energetic strides leading the way and Dogeon dragging his feet behind her, I had no choice but to follow them to another floor.

Anya clearly didn't plan to let us go until she was satisfied.

Seeing Dogeon being crushed under the weight of his own good intentions made me feel a little smug. Serves you right.

It wasn't the worst feeling.

Until I ran into a familiar face.

"…Big bro? Is that you, Black Wolf?"

"…Big bro?"

“…Big bro?” Anya echoed, eyes darting toward me.

“Yeah, I told you not to call me that outside… Anyway, it’s been a while, Your Highness.”

His voice was as cocky as ever, but right now, I really didn’t want to see him.

I was in the middle of playing dress-up with Anya, and I didn’t want anyone I knew to see me like this.

Compared to the first dress, it was a little better, but it was still more revealing than my school uniform, and I felt embarrassed wearing it.

“…More importantly, who are these people next to you?”

With a smooth, natural movement, his hand reached for his sword.

I panicked and quickly introduced Dogeon and Anya.

“They’re my friends!”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 58

Chapter 58: Black Wolf

“Oh, so they’re your friends?”

I didn’t breathe a sigh of relief until the murderous aura that had filled the air vanished.

For a moment, I had genuinely worried that he might actually draw his sword and cut them down.

Of course, I had to admit that this situation was partially my own doing.

“…They really are your friends, right? You’re not secretly being threatened by some weird guys or anything like that, are you?”

Although Black Wolf had withdrawn his killing intent, his gaze remained sharp and watchful. I couldn’t blame him.

After all, I’d given him plenty of reasons to be wary of me in the past.

If I think back to my earliest memories, I remember that he never seemed particularly fond of me. But if I ever ran toward the river or climbed onto a desk, he’d freak out and rush to pull me back to a safe spot.

Looking back now, I realized I had a habit of doing things that would make both him and Father panic.

For example, approaching noble elders just because they called me “cute” or running off to help a commoner who said they had an emergency.

In hindsight, I could see why they'd be worried.

Still, I felt it was a bit unfair. The nobles really were just complimenting me, and the commoners genuinely did need help.

Most of those situations ended on a positive note too.

But a happy ending didn't reduce the amount of stress I caused them. As a result, it wasn't too surprising that Black Wolf would grip his sword the moment anyone got too close to me.

I supposed I was somewhat responsible for that.

"They're not weird or bad people."

So it was my responsibility to clear things up.

"If Her Highness says so, then I'll believe it." Black Wolf nodded, but his eyes still stayed sharp.

"That aside… what brings you here?"

"Well… We're here to buy some clothes!"

"Clothes, huh? You should've just asked your parents to send you some."

"Keep it down…!"

It wasn't that I disliked Father, but his taste in clothes was… questionable.

I wasn't sure why. In my previous life, I used to wear whatever clothes my dad bought for me without a second thought. But at some point in this life, I started feeling reluctant to wear the things Father picked out.

Mother didn't buy clothes for me as often, but when she did, she always picked out practical, durable, and comfortable outfits.

More importantly—why did he have to bring that up in front of my friends?!

I felt so embarrassed that I started to resent him a little.

“Since you were going somewhere unusual, I thought you’d been dragged away by some shady thugs. Glad to see that’s not the case.”

Seeing him finally take his hand off his sword, I felt relieved.

Of course, even without the sword, he was still strong enough to handle Dogeon and Anya in the blink of an eye, but I didn’t sense any signs that he intended to do so.

It seemed like he was thinking, “Well, since it’s Hoyeon, I’ll just watch and see what happens.”

“Father, you, and everyone else are too overprotective. I’m a grown-up now.”

I made it clear that I didn’t appreciate being treated like a child, though I still felt happy to see him. After all, it had been about a month since I last saw him.

“Oh, overprotective, huh? I still remember carrying you on my shoulders like it was just yesterday.”

Hearing him laugh so awkwardly like that somehow washed away some of my earlier resentment.

…If I thought about what he’d done on his way here, I might have felt differently, but how could I hate someone who came all this way just to check on me?

“…That ‘big bro’ title is a bit curious, and… who exactly are you? What’s your relationship with Hoyeon?”

It seemed that Anya’s curiosity had finally reached its limit. She had been holding it in for a while, but now she finally spoke up.

I had been wondering when she’d ask.

If someone I considered a friend suddenly had a super familiar guy calling himself “big bro,” I’d be curious too.

“Oh, where are my manners? I’m Black Wolf, and I hold the humble position of captain of the royal escort. Pleased to meet you, friends. Is that how I should call you?”

“I’m Anastasia. But you can call me whatever you like.”

“Anastasia… I feel like I’ve heard that name before… Ah, that’s right. You’re the only daughter of the Grand Duke of the North, aren’t you? My Hoyeon, is also an only child. I see, so that’s how you two became friends.”

He had just been on the verge of cutting them down, but now he was all smiles and friendly small talk. It felt a bit surreal, but at least things were peaceful now, so I had no complaints.

“So you’re the captain of the royal escort that’s been making all the rumors.”

Rumors, huh?

Considering he’d dueled with knights, taken hostages, and caused quite a commotion, I figured it was only natural for stories to spread. Still, this was the first time I’d heard that he’d become a “rumor” himself.

“Ah, those are just exaggerated tales. All I did was ask them to step aside when they blocked my path.”

Black Wolf waved it off like it was nothing.

That was just like him. He didn’t care about that kind of stuff, but you’d think he’d be at least a little embarrassed or maybe even a bit proud.

Nope. He didn’t care at all.

“…So you’re that escort captain.”

Huh?

Why was Dogeon, who was practically buried under shopping bags, suddenly acting like he recognized him?

***

The Black Wolf looked even more unreliable than how he had been described in the original story.

But in truth, he was one of the key allies in the second part of the story.

Not just a key ally—he was essential to the final battle.

Jeongho, for some unknown reason, had massacred Black Wolf's tribe.

Despite fierce resistance, Black Wolf caught Jeongho's attention, and Jeongho made him the captain of the royal escort.

Black Wolf resisted the role fiercely, but Byeolbi used some mysterious method to force him into submission.

Because of all that, Black Wolf harbored a deep grudge against the royal family.

The protagonist and their party eventually learned of this and convinced Black Wolf to help them bypass security and infiltrate the royal palace.

Black Wolf's plan was to tie down Jeongho while Byeolbi handled the protagonist's party.

But as shown in the ending… Everything went horribly wrong.

Byeolbi didn't even see the protagonist's party as opponents, treating the "battle" more like a playful game.

He slowly took down the party one by one, and when he finished off the protagonist, Jeongho arrived from afar, walking slowly toward them.

And that's where the novel ended.

How was that supposed to be a harem ending?

Anyway, with such a grim backstory, Black Wolf was basically broken when he first appeared in the story.

But the way he was acting right now was a little different from how he had been portrayed in the original.

Instead of a man who had given up on hope, he was acting like a laid-back uncle who pretended to be humble but was clearly reliable.

Was this another effect of the “Hoyeon Snowball” that kept rolling bigger and bigger?

I couldn’t be sure.

But one thing was certain—I had to make sure I left a good impression on Black Wolf.

“Oh, so that guy’s your boyfriend?”

“Didn’t you once say the only men you’d ever meet were me and Father, Hoyeon?”

“N-no! I mean, he is my friend, but…! He’s not…!”

Seeing the amused look on Black Wolf’s face as he glanced back and forth between me and Hoyeon, I got the feeling I’d at least left a good first impression on him.

“Yes, as Hoyeon said, I’m just a friend.”

I decided not to add the unnecessary detail that Hoyeon frequently visited my room.

Unlike Jeongho, Black Wolf actually cared about Hoyeon, so I didn’t want to say anything that could be misinterpreted.

“Yeah! Just a friend! No, not just a friend—a best friend, but…!”

Hoyeon eagerly backed up my words, firmly denying Black Wolf's assumptions.

Since she put it like that, he finally relented.

"Ah, I see, I see. Then we'll go with that. So, 'best friend,' what's your name?"

"My name is Han Dogeon."

"Oh? From the Eastern Continent, are you?"

"Technically, my parents are from the Eastern Continent. They fled to the Western Continent during the war, and I was born here."

"Is that so… Must've been tough on your folks. War's never easy." He nodded solemnly before his eyes shifted to the paper bags I was carrying. "Anyway, want me to help with those bags? I can see your legs shaking."

I had been using mana to circulate through my body just to stay upright, but it seemed that a master like him could still see through me.

When I first started carrying the paper bags, I hadn't thought much of it. But as the number of bags increased, so did my regrets.

I wondered if Anya's wallet could handle all these purchases. Did she plan to buy everything she saw that she liked? And why was Hoyeon just silently wearing everything Anya picked out without complaint?

Sure, I got to enjoy the view a few times along the way, but no amount of mental satisfaction could overcome physical exhaustion.

For the past two hours, I'd been lugging around a load heavier than my own body weight, and my legs were on the verge of giving out.

I started seriously worrying about how I'd make it back to our lodgings. So when Black Wolf offered to help, I had no reason to refuse.

"…Yes, I'd be grateful if you could carry some of it."

The moment he approached to take some of the bags—

“…If you try anything, you know what’ll happen, right?”

“…Y-yes, sir.”

It was brief, but in that instant, I felt something.

It wasn’t as wild and uncontrolled as Hoyeon’s aura. No, it was far more precise—a focused, crushing intent.

Unlike Hoyeon’s oppressive energy that spilled in every direction, this was like being skewered by a single pinpoint of deadly pressure.

With just a few words, he had managed to completely shrink me down.

“Be good.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what he meant by it, but it sounded an awful lot like, “If you touch Hoyeon, I’ll kill you.”

Before I knew it, Black Wolf had taken half of the bags from me, and he had already returned to his usual lazy, unreliable demeanor.

“…Oi, ladies. I think it’s about time you stop buying clothes. This guy’s shoulders are about to give out.”

“Don’t be such a baby, Big Bro,” Anya replied with a pout.

“No, seriously. That guy’s only holding on because he’s too stubborn to complain. If you tried carrying it, your shoulders would pop out immediately.”

“…It’s really that bad?”

“Yep. Anastasia, you do have a plan for carrying all this home, right?”

“U-uh… I thought Dogeon could handle it…”

“Sorry, Anya. I’m at my limit.”

If we visited one more floor, I was sure I’d get buried under a pile of clothes and suffocate.

“…Hoyeon, is this much really enough? It feels like we didn’t get everything we needed…”

“…If I’m being honest, I think we bought too much. Let’s go back.”

“…Huh? Was I… the only one having fun?”

Yes.

Even Hoyeon, the reason we came here in the first place, said it was too much.

The moment she realized she was the only one enjoying herself, Anya lowered her head, clearly embarrassed.

“Th-then… shall we head back…?”

With Anya finally giving in, everyone else quickly began moving toward the exit.

The only one who looked like they wanted to stay was Anya, but even she had started walking.

As I dragged my exhausted body along, a random thought crossed my mind.

Do beastfolk have some kind of racial ability that lets them release killing intent?

That brief moment of terror I felt earlier kept replaying in my head as I struggled to move my heavy legs.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 59

Chapter 59: Not For Your Sake

“…Lieutenant, do you have any idea why Hoyeon’s interested in that feeble guy?”

The lieutenant, who had helped carry the luggage to the dorms at Black Wolf’s command, furrowed his brow at the question.

“If you’re asking about the tricks and schemes our enemies might pull, I could give you an answer right away… But asking an old man like me to understand a young girl’s heart is a bit much, don’t you think?”

“So, you don’t know either, huh?”

From the perspective of beastfolk like them, Dogeon was a hopeless man.

He lacked strength, stamina, and, to make it worse, he kept letting his gaze wander to other women. They couldn’t understand why Hoyeon would be drawn to a man like that.

Of course, that didn’t mean they could interfere.

Just like Byeolbi had given Dogeon his orders, the beastfolk had also been commanded — they were not to interfere with Hoyeon unless her life was in imminent danger.

And since Byeolbi’s orders took precedence over even Jeongho’s commands, they couldn’t disobey.

“…Sigh. I really don’t get why Hoyeon’s heart wavers for a guy like that.”

“I feel the same, sir. With how frail he is, he wouldn’t even make it as a warrior. If it were that girl next to him, it’d be a different story.”

They grumbled and complained about Dogeon, but at the very least, they acknowledged his appearance.

“If she’s just into his looks, that’d be fine. At least then she’d wise up once she saw his true nature.”

“It would’ve been better if that were the case, sir.”

After escorting Hoyeon and her group to the front of the academy, the two beastfolk wandered off, but they didn’t head back toward their lodgings.

Already in a sour mood, they decided to blow off steam by hunting down some of the local criminal organizations.

Hoyeon had once said that slave traders and armed robbers were fair game to take down, so they intended to do just that.

Of course, she wouldn’t be happy if she found out, but they both felt like moving their bodies to shake off their frustrations.

They ignored the sound of footsteps following them and played the role of lost travelers. Before long, several men emerged from the shadows and surrounded them.

“That stuff they’ve got is mine. Do whatever you want with their bodies. Beastfolk fetch a high price these days, right?”

“Hey, what’re you talking about? If I catch them, their bodies and belongings are mine.”

“Pfft, keep dreaming.”

The thugs were already drunk on the delusion of a bright future, loudly quarreling over spoils they hadn’t even secured.

Black Wolf and the lieutenant exchanged smiles.

They shared the same thought.

It's best to weed out anything that could harm Hoyeon ahead of time.

That day, thirty bodies filled with stab wounds were left scattered throughout the alley.

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"…I'm getting chills."

It felt like a sudden, inexplicable wave of unease, like the sensation of walking through a place where a lot of people had just died.

"Huh? Hoyeon-nyang, are you cold?"

"…It's not cold. I just got chills for some reason."

"Is that so…? I get that sometimes too. Out of nowhere, I start shivering for no reason."

Since Anya said she'd experienced it too, I decided not to think too hard about it.

Sometimes, your body just shakes out of nowhere. Heart attacks and seizures happen suddenly, after all.

…Or maybe it was Anya's hands and eyes creeping me out.

Not that she was being weird on purpose, but it was still a little uncomfortable having another girl's hands on me.

Other than my maids and my mother, I'd never really had anyone else touch me like this.

At noble banquets back home, daughters from other noble families used to approach me, but I pushed them all away.

This was my first time having a girl my age help me pick out clothes like this.

Come to think of it, I'd been experiencing a lot of "firsts" since coming to the academy.

It was the first time I'd made a proper friend. My first female friend, too.

…And my first male friend as well. A friend, not a lover.

A male friend.

…Wait.

"Let's see… If I tie the ribbon like this… There. It looks a little better, doesn't it?"

Just because we'd left the department store didn't mean the "dress-up game" had ended.

Anya was still swapping tops and bottoms, trying to find the perfect casual outfit for me from the new clothes we'd bought.

For an hour.

Dogeon, his whole body sore, had long since gone to his room and collapsed.

I'd tried to follow him, but Anya had grabbed me and wouldn't let me go.

"By the way, Hoyeon-nyang, you're not tying your hair back anymore?"

Oh, that.

"…It's a hassle."

At some point, I just stopped. It was a pain to tie it up every morning, and I'd even lost my usual hair tie.

I still had a few spares, but I didn't feel like using them anymore.

"Ah… because it's a hassle… I see. That makes sense."

I wasn't sure what she was thinking, but after that, she went quiet and continued working on me in silence.

"…Alright, all done! What do you think of this one?"

I stood in front of the mirror, but my only thought was, "It looks pretty."

Honestly, I thought the academy uniform looked better.

Even if it was a holiday, I was still inside the academy, so wouldn't it make more sense to wear my uniform?

"…I don't really know."

"Again?!"

Anya had been trying so hard to find a combination I'd like, but I just didn't get it.

"Excuse me, Lady Anastasia. Are you inside?"

"Anya! Let's have lunch together!"

"Exipri, you're supposed to say Lady Anastasia."

"Ah, right! Lady Anastasia! Let's have lunch together!"

Just as I was feeling tired enough to collapse, someone knocked on the door.

That voice was familiar.

The first voice was sharp and commanding, but the second, cute one—I was sure I'd heard it before.

“Ah, is that Camilla and Exipri? Just a moment…!”

Anya quickly gathered up the clothes I’d been trying on and stuffed them into a paper bag. Then she called out to the people outside.

“…Alright, you can come in!”

At her signal, I heard a metallic click as the lock disengaged and the door swung open.

Why doesn’t my room have something like that?

“Good day, Lady Anastasia.”

The first to enter was a girl who greeted Anya with a polite bow. But as soon as she saw me, her words briefly came to a halt.

Though she resumed talking right away, I didn’t miss the brief flash of hostility in her eyes.

…I’ve never seen this girl before. Did I do something to make her mad?

“Nice to meet you! Lady Anastasia! And… um… never mind…”

Exipri immediately hid behind the first girl when she spotted me.

I suppose she’s still scared of me because of the whole gymnasium incident.

So, that meant the girl in front of her was probably Camilla.

Did I do something to make Camilla hate me?

“…Actually, we came to see if you’d join us for lunch today, Lady Anastasia. Also… who might that person beside you be?”

Her words were polite, but she was clearly aware of who I was. Her feigned ignorance was too deliberate.

Is this what a real noble looks like?

It seemed Anya didn't pick up on the mood, as she eagerly introduced me to Camilla and Exipri.

"Oh, you don't know? This is Baek Hoyeon, a princess from the Eastern Empire. There are some strange rumors about her, but I think they're all just misunderstandings!"

"So you're the princess from a foreign land. It's an honor to meet you."

"Likewise."

She clearly didn't like me, but since she greeted me politely, I responded in kind.

"Would you like to join us for lunch, Hoyeon-nyang?"

"Oh my, it would be an honor, but… it's a reserved seating arrangement. If you were to join us, you'd have to sit alone. Would that be alright with you?"

Basically, she was saying, "You don't belong, so don't come."

I'd forgotten that Anya and Dogeon weren't the norm for nobles. This was what typical nobles were like.

"No, it's fine. I have companions waiting for me as well, so it's better if we part ways here."

It was the perfect excuse to get away from Anya, too. If I stayed any longer, she'd just keep forcing me to change outfits.

Sorry, Anya, but I never planned on joining you in the first place.

Besides, I had a feeling that Camilla might end up being another Stefania type, calling me over just to mess with me.

Not that Stefania had ever done that, but it felt like something she would do.

And I didn't want to get any more entangled with nobles than I already was.

"…Yes, as Hoyeon-nim says, it's better if we part ways here. I hope you have a pleasant meal with your companions."

Her words were polite, but her tone was as cutting as ever.

With that final passive-aggressive remark echoing behind me, I left the room with both hands full of paper bags.

Even with just a few lightweight outfits, my arms felt like they were about to fall off. I could only imagine how much Dogeon had suffered.

Somehow, I managed to drag the bags back to my room, stuffed the clothes into my wardrobe, and was about to change into my uniform.

But… Anya had put so much effort into picking these clothes, so it felt a bit wrong to just toss them aside.

…To be honest, I was also curious about how Dogeon would react if he saw me in them.

Back at the department store, he'd widened his eyes at first, but by the end, he'd only shown a face that screamed, "I'm so done with this."

But now that he'd had a chance to rest, I wondered how he'd react.

Not that I was trying to impress him or anything. Absolutely not.

With that thought, I left my room in the same outfit and headed for Dogeon's.

He must have been completely exhausted because he'd collapsed onto his bed without even pulling up the blanket.

If I woke him up now, I'd feel like a human alarm clock, always being the one to call him for mealtime.

So I waited.

For about 10 minutes.

But he didn’t wake up.

Seriously, if I weren’t here, this guy would probably survive on just one or two meals a day.

It didn’t really matter in this world of fiction, but knowing that this guy had once been a Korean like me, it felt a bit sad.

“…Wake up.”

Just like I did this morning, I tickled the tip of his nose with my tail.

He reacted right away.

“Ugh… My body… Hoyeon… huh?”

His gaze was a little strange. It wasn’t like how he’d looked at me in the department store.

But I figured it was just because he’d just woken up.

More importantly, before I told him it was dinnertime, I had something I wanted to ask.

“…Dogeon, do I… look different to you?”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 60

Chapter 60: I've Been Through Too Much

I knew that the people around Hoyeon would end up being trials for me.

It was surprising to see Black Wolf act like that, but since he'd been close to Hoyeon since childhood, I figured he might go easy on me, even if I was the son of his enemy.

But I never expected Hoyeon herself to be one of my trials.

Sitting casually on the edge of my bed, she gave me a fresh, radiant smile while asking a question that was… really difficult to answer.

Whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, she had changed from head to toe.

The fortunate part was that it was easy to tell what had changed.

The unfortunate part was that everything had changed, so there were too many things to point out.

To make matters worse, I'd just been given a warning by Black Wolf not too long ago, so dealing with her now felt more complicated than usual.

And of all times, she had to ask that question now. The timing couldn't have been worse.

"…You changed into one of the outfits you bought at the department store."

Even if it was Hoyeon, I didn't know how to answer a question like this.

Whenever women ask these kinds of questions, it usually doesn't end well.

"Yeah. Anya picked it out and dressed me… How is it?"

So that's why it looked so well put together.

No wonder it seemed more polished than Hoyeon's usual style.

Now that I think about it, that meant she'd been stuck with Anya this whole time.

I remembered seeing Hoyeon's expression change at the department store.

At first, she looked shy and a little surprised. But toward the end, it was obvious she just wanted to leave.

I managed to escape by pretending to be exhausted, but it seemed she hadn't been so lucky.

"It looks good. Seems like going to the department store was worth it."

No lies there. She looked genuinely beautiful. It didn't have the same destructive power as the dress she wore earlier, but it was still striking enough to catch everyone's attention.

Her half-lidded eyes, likely from exhaustion, only added to the effect.

If it weren't for the deadly nature of her question, I would've admired her openly.

Instead, I was racking my brain, trying to figure out how to get out of this situation.

"…Right?"

"If I had to give you one piece of advice, it's to be careful when you're eating. If something like red sauce splashes on your new white clothes, you'll be really sad."

I'd never seen Hoyeon stain her clothes while eating, but it didn't hurt to offer some advice.

After all, she usually only wore black clothes.

"…I see. Anyway, you're saying I look pretty!"

Hoyeon's face lit up with a smile, and I felt like I'd just barely managed to survive.

I was relieved that she was satisfied with my answer.

Phew… I'm glad she let it slide.

But just as I started to relax, she spoke up again.

"Also… don't you have anything else to say?"

Apparently, she wasn't done yet.

Her tail stood upright, and she stared at me expectantly, clearly fishing for more compliments.

I was relieved Black Wolf wasn't here to see this.

If he'd been watching, I might have died on the spot.

"…The skirt's shorter than usual. And you changed your stockings too."

"Yup! Anya picked them out for me! Aren't they cute…?"

Luckily, she seemed satisfied with just a little more praise.

Without risking my life, I could simply compliment her exactly the way she wanted.

But a question suddenly popped into my head.

"…By the way, Hoyeon. Where's the hole for your tail on the skirt?"

I'd always been curious about it.

Her tail moved so freely, but it never flipped up her skirt.

The skirt moved along with her tail but never flipped over.

Her tail moved a lot — sometimes violently — so why did it never lift the skirt?

"Hehehe… huh? Tail hole? Oh, I guess you wouldn't know since you're not a beastfolk."

Her exhaustion must have made her more talkative because her voice had a lazy, light tone to it.

It felt a little wrong to satisfy my curiosity while she wasn't fully alert, but I told myself it was fine since I only wanted to know how it worked.

However, contrary to my expectations, Hoyeon didn't just tell me.

She reached for her skirt with her hand.

***

Despite being exhausted from Anya's "outfit marathon," I was grateful to her in the end.

Thanks to her, I got to hear Dogeon compliment me.

No matter how tired I was, a few words of praise could lift me right up.

It felt like he could read my mind, picking out exactly what I wanted to hear.

I guess that's something insiders are good at.

For once, I was glad he was an "insider."

It would be nice if he only said those kinds of words to me…

But if he really started showing off, he'd probably say the same things to other girls too.

…Yeah, I don't like that.

Just as those thoughts started creeping into my mind, Dogeon suddenly asked me a question.

"…By the way, Hoyeon. Where's the hole for your tail on the skirt?"

At first, I thought he was going to say something important.

But no, he wanted to know something that only beastfolk would understand.

Just as I was about to explain it normally, a mischievous idea popped into my head.

What kind of reaction would Dogeon have if I suddenly lifted my skirt in front of him?

"Hehehe… Huh? Tail hole? Oh, you wouldn't know since you're not a beastfolk…"

I was sleepy, in a good mood from all the compliments I'd received, and the thought just came to me.

Well, he's a guy, but he's also a friend, so it should be fine.

It's not like my underwear would be visible anyway.

More than anything, I wanted to leave a lasting impression on him.

So that even if he ended up fooling around with other girls later, he wouldn't forget me.

With that in mind, I slowly stood up and grabbed the hem of my skirt.

Dogeon's face immediately stiffened, and his voice became urgent.

“Hoyeon, wait, I really think that’s not a good idea— huh?”

“Ta-da~! It’s a double-layered skirt! Were you expecting something else?”

Underneath the outer skirt was another skirt with a hole for my tail. So no matter how much I moved, only the outer skirt shifted.

This was a method commonly used back home. When I asked them to make it that way at the department store, they actually did it.

Dogeon’s reaction was exactly as I’d expected.

He looked like a man who had just seen his world come crashing down.

“…Dogeon?”

No, seriously. He looked like someone who had just watched a person die in front of him.

Did I overdo it?

“…Dogeon? You okay?”

“Hoyeon.”

“Y-yeah?”

Dogeon, who suddenly looked ten years older, spoke in a voice that seemed to come from the depths of his soul.

“I don’t think that kind of prank is a good idea.”

“O-oh… Okay.”

I quietly let go of the outer skirt and, for some reason, felt like I should sit with my hands neatly folded on my lap.

The atmosphere was telling me that if I pushed my luck any further, something serious would happen.

“…Let’s go eat.”

“A-ah… Okay.”

He wasn’t usually like this, but seeing him act like he’d experienced all the hardships of life made me instinctively follow his lead.

Even though he’d been too tired to stand a moment ago, now he was walking with firm, determined strides. I had to hurry just to keep up.

…Did he get mad?

I thought it was just a playful prank, but maybe I went too far.

I figured he’d laugh it off, but I guess not.

I should apologize… but how do I even bring it up?

“Umm…”

I worked up the courage to say something, but Dogeon wasn’t ready to hear it.

Ugh, I hope he doesn’t stay mad at me. I really think I went too far.

I kept glancing at him as we walked, but I couldn’t find the right moment to apologize.

The whole way to the cafeteria, I couldn’t come up with a good idea.

What if this prank makes me lose a friend?

That thought terrified me.

Even worse, Dogeon was completely ignoring me.

He didn’t even glance my way, and when I did talk to him, he responded dryly, without any emotion.

I was lost in thought, worrying over what to do.

Then, suddenly, Dogeon draped something over me.

Huh?

I reached up to see what it was and realized it was an apron.

…What?

“Be careful not to get your clothes dirty.”

His voice was flat and emotionless, but at least he wasn’t ignoring me anymore.

“…So you’re not mad?”

“Why would I ever get mad at you, Hoyeon?”

His voice was still dry, with no emotion at all, but he was helping me like usual.

It was confusing.

So, is he mad or not?

“…Alright. Thank you.”

Even though I hadn’t apologized yet, he was still being nice to me. That only made me feel worse.

I felt like I was sitting on a bed of nails.

I’d done something wrong, but he was acting like it didn’t matter, which just made me feel more guilty.

In the end, I quietly thanked him.

We finished our meal and returned to the dorms, but I still didn't have any answers.

The moment we got back, I couldn't hold it in anymore and finally asked him.

"…Are you mad?"

"No, I'm really not mad."

"…Then why have you been acting like that since earlier…?"

He hadn't said much.

Even when he did, his voice was flat, like he didn't want to talk to me.

But at the same time, he wasn't being mean.

It felt like he was upset, but not upset.

"…It's just that I felt a bit uncomfortable."

Uncomfortable?

"Look, even between friends, there are certain boundaries that shouldn't be crossed. What you did earlier is one of those things, no matter how close we are."

"…That's… a thing?"

Seriously?

I thought friends were supposed to be able to mess with each other like that.

Aren't friends the kind of people who come into your house uninvited, drink your cola, and leave a note saying, "I took one, I owe you," or something?

"…Yeah. So, I'd appreciate it if you didn't do something like that again."

“O-okay. Then… we’re still friends, right…?”

The way he was talking about “boundaries” suddenly made me feel uneasy.

It sounded like one of those speeches people give before they say, “I don’t think we should be friends anymore.”

I didn’t want that.

I really didn’t want that.

“Of course, we’re still friends. I’m just saying it’d be nice if you understood the boundaries that exist between friends.”

Dogeon’s tone became strangely serious, as if he was about to start talking about something profound.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 61

Chapter 61: A Relationship Deeper Than Friendship

Would trying to untangle the Gordian Knot with your bare hands feel something like this?

“…So… is it wrong for friends to just visit without asking first?”

“Yes.”

“…And there’s no need to exchange money?”

“That depends on the situation, but generally, it’s better not to.”

“…You don’t have to bring what they ask for, and… oh… um… you don’t show them the inside of your skirt either?”

The more I talked with Hoyeon, the more absurd it became. Hoyeon’s idea of “friends” seemed more like attendants or servants.

Considering her status, it wasn’t hard to imagine how people approached her or treated her. But this? This was too much.

She hadn’t even formed a proper, normal friendship, and being treated like a figure to be worshipped had distorted her understanding of what friendship was.

Add her ignorance to the mix, and disasters like the one earlier were bound to happen.

Even now, byeolbi was probably keeping an eye on us. Sure, she claimed to be indifferent, but could she really just stand by?

The thought filled me with dread.

"…Then what is a friend supposed to be…? The friends I knew… what were they?"

Where was I even supposed to start fixing this?

I wanted to say it was just about mutual respect, but if I said that, she'd probably misunderstand again.

Teaching someone whose upbringing had been so different wasn't easy. Sometimes, she'd say things that defied common sense.

"For example, no matter how close you are as friends, you don't suddenly undress in front of them, barge into their home demanding meals, or anything like that."

"…I see."

"And you don't sleep over without saying anything first. You don't need to wake them up for every meal either. If you're doing these things because you want to, that's one thing, but if it's just because you think that's what friends do, then please stop."

It was exhausting to correct her point by point, but I tried to tackle each misunderstanding one at a time.

Thankfully, she wasn't stubborn and was learning bit by bit.

I thought about telling her to stop flicking her tail at me, but since I didn't know much about beastfolk culture, I decided it wasn't my place to comment.

Honestly, it felt kind of nice, too.

After an hour of lecturing, I felt I'd made at least a little progress.

“Hoyeon, so what’s a friend?”

“Mutual respect… um… so no undressing in front of them, no sleeping over without permission, no sending them on errands and paying them for it…”

“…Yeah, that’s good enough.”

My time hadn’t been wasted after all. Was this how Hoyeon felt when she taught us?

I couldn’t tell from her expression when I’d shown her my report card, but she might have felt this same sense of satisfaction.

I managed to score third place, after all.

“But… Dogeon.”

“Yeah?”

With a look full of pure, untainted curiosity, she asked me,

“Then… does being friends mean it’s okay to peek while someone’s bathing?”

Ah.

Honestly, I’d glossed over that incident too much. I knew I’d have to face the consequences someday, and it seemed Hoyeon was ready to make me pay for it.

“Well, you see…”

Since there weren’t many pieces of furniture in the room, we were sitting on the floor while I taught her. The moment felt appropriate.

I shifted into a kneeling position.

“Dogeon?”

“…I’m sorry!”

Bowing my head to the ground, I poured as much regret as I could into my apology.

Honestly, when I saw the two neatly folded outfits by the river, I couldn’t resist my curiosity and desire.

Maybe it was the strange, sweet scent that had been tickling my nose since the day before, clouding my mind like fog.

Of course, after nearly cracking my head open on a rock, I snapped out of it right away.

I should’ve restrained myself. Even now, I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t been able to.

“I couldn’t fight curiosity or desire. I’ll accept whatever punishment you deem fit…!”

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Curiosity… and desire. Those are two things that are hard to resist.

As a human—before even being a man—I knew firsthand how difficult it was to suppress those feelings.

Having lost much of my humanity as a child and then regained it later, I could feel their intensity even more.

I hadn’t understood why I was like that as a kid, but later, I found out.

The cause was my mother.

It was something she admitted to me later. Being an entity from beyond the stars, she apparently lacked emotions or anything like that.

She also told me, with an unsettling candor, that she hadn’t originally planned to have a child but suddenly felt the urge to and did it anyway.

Perhaps because of that, half of my traits seemed to stem from her.

Well, I got them back by the time I was seven, so I guess it worked out.

Anyway, back to the present.

I stood up from where I'd been sitting.

In front of me, Dogeon lay flat on the ground, as if bracing for punishment.

If he wanted punishment, I had to deliver. I didn't want to leave him feeling guilty or burdened.

I lifted my foot and gently stepped on his head.

After applying light pressure, I withdrew my foot.

"…There. Punishment."

Stepping on a friend's head wasn't exactly a pleasant experience.

When it came to teasing him verbally, it was fun, but doing something physical? Not so much.

Even after receiving his punishment, he remained stuck to the floor, showing no intention of getting up. I brushed the dust off his head and helped him stand.

"Get up. It's over."

Dogeon looked at me, still incredulous.

"…But I saw you two… naked. Are you really just going to let it go like this?"

"You already got scolded by Anya for that, didn't you? Besides, I don't think you did anything unforgivable."

The Complex Stares He Gave Me Made Me Feel Relieved, So I Couldn't Help Adding One More Thing.

"But if you try peeking at another woman like that… it won't end like this."

"…I get it. I'm sorry."

Even if he said that, he'd probably do it again. And worse, while doubling down on it.

"If you're sorry, then answer just one more question for me."

"Huh…? Okay."

As I listened to Dogeon talk, a thought crossed my mind. Once he built his harem, would he forget about me, his friend?

From the way he spoke, it felt like I had even less presence than the noisy upstairs neighbor.

So, I came up with an idea.

If being friends wasn't enough, why not aim for a relationship deeper than friendship?

With that in mind, I asked Dogeon,

"I want to… form a relationship that's a little deeper than friendship. Would that be okay…?"

"…What?"

I knew the next step after being friends was being best friends. Dogeon should understand exactly what I meant.

I wanted to be best friends with him.

I knew it wasn't something you could just decide to do, but I still wanted to say it out loud, even if it was only words.

It made me happy, after all.

But Dogeon's reaction was strange.

He looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders again, just like earlier.

What now?

"Hoyeon, do you really understand what you just said?"

Where did all that guilt from earlier go? Could someone really switch their attitude so quickly?

"…Of course, I do!"

Did he think I was an idiot? This wasn't something worth overreacting to.

"…Really?"

"Yes!"

I felt a little hurt. Was I the only one who thought we were close enough to be best friends?

Even now, Dogeon hesitated, as if weighing his answer carefully.

"Hoyeon, I'm interpreting what you just said as you wanting to… date me. Am I right?"

…Date? Who with?

Me? With Dogeon?

How did it suddenly turn into that?

For a moment, an image flashed through my mind. Dogeon calling my name, me smiling back, and at night… us lying on the bed together─

Ah. My stomach tightened. Why was I reacting like this? I wasn't even in heat!

"N-No… That's not what I meant… I just wanted us to be best friends…!"

I was so flustered, and my stomach hurt so much that I couldn't speak properly.

How did "let's be best friends" turn into "let's be lovers"?

"Hoyeon, are you feeling really tired right now?"

I wasn't sure if it was exhaustion or just dizziness, but my vision swam. Was that fatigue? I didn't know.

Between the embarrassment and the stomachache, I couldn't tell what was what. I even thought I heard Dogeon whispering my name.

Maybe I really was exhausted.

"…Yeah. I think I'm really sleepy…"

"You look like it. How about you go get some rest?"

"…Yeah, I think I should."

If I stayed up any longer, I didn't know what kind of nonsense I might end up saying.

It seemed best to follow Dogeon's suggestion and head to bed.

After all, dealing with Ana had worn me out, and Dogeon had flipped my understanding of common sense, leaving my head spinning.

"Goodnight, then."

"…Sweet dreams."

Leaving those words behind, I fled back to my room.

Had I gone crazy? Thinking it over again, I realized that, based on my choice of words, Dogeon's misunderstanding wasn't entirely unreasonable.

I'd have to be more careful next time.

Anya's gift—clothes that were somewhere between casual wear and a uniform—didn't seem suitable to just drape over a chair, so I hung them properly on hangers.

I wanted to grab my pajamas, but with so many new clothes added to my wardrobe, I couldn't even see where they were. I gave up.

Instead, I jumped onto the bed in just my underwear, closed my eyes, and tried to sleep. But then, I wondered what it would be like if Dogeon were on the same bed.

Why was I thinking about that?

I didn't even know why. The idea of being in a relationship with him felt foreign, yet… not entirely unpleasant.

…At this point, I didn't even know myself anymore.

I wasn't sure if I was male or female.

Even asking my mother for advice felt… too embarrassing for this topic.

If I asked my father, he'd probably demand to know who this "punk" was.

But really, having Dogeon next to me would be nice.

I couldn't shake that thought before falling asleep.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 62

Chapter 62: Resolution

When I knocked on the door, it took a long time before I finally heard a voice telling me to come in.

As soon as I opened the door, the air inside was completely different. Professors were allowed to modify their assigned rooms to some extent, but this went far beyond reasonable limits.

The room was larger inside than it appeared outside, and the clear morning sky visible from the corridor had been replaced by a sinister hue outside the windows.

Mana circuits filled the room, densely packed in an overwhelming array.

At the center of this bizarre space sat Georg, greeting me with a blatantly irritated look.

“It’s a holiday today. What brings you here? Dogeon. Are you here for supplementary lessons?”

“…Yes.”

He politely told me to leave, but I couldn’t.

Because I had come here today for precisely that reason—to receive supplementary lessons from him.

“Oh?”

He seemed mildly surprised at my boldness, showing a flicker of interest.

Even as he continued manipulating floating crimson and yellow papers in the air, he signaled a willingness to hear me out.

"…To be precise, I want to get stronger."

Seeing the way Hoyeon acted yesterday, I felt more worry than anything else. It wasn't just about using her—she seemed far too trusting.

Whether it was her inability to refuse Anya's proposal or the incomprehensible kindness she showed me, everything made me uneasy.

Her distorted understanding of friendship and the lack of someone to correct her misconceptions during her childhood led me to fear that she might form another "friend."

Unlike me, who knew what lay behind her, others wouldn't understand.

If some lowlife became her "friend," it wouldn't end well—for her or for the continent.

If the Black Wolf got involved, it could escalate into a diplomatic incident, and the White Tiger wouldn't overlook it.

My concerns weren't just for Hoyeon—they extended to the entire continent.

"Are you talking about physical strength or magical strength?"

"…Both."

But I lacked the power to protect her.

When faced with those monstrous forces, I couldn't do anything.

…It was a bit of an extreme guess, but she might even have the ability to command monsters and fiends.

But humans wouldn’t obey her just because she commanded them.

Even though she was a princess, she was from another continent, and the ignorant people who didn’t even know her title might try to approach her with ill intentions.

No matter how strong the Black Wolf was, he wasn’t always around her, and he couldn’t stop someone truly malicious from getting close to her.

“Hah, you’re quite ambitious. Judging by your visit, you’re not planning to take your time getting stronger, are you?”

“No.”

Georg’s lips curved into a menacing smile.

I had no intention of involving myself in anything that required sacrificing my life or taking on extreme risks.

But…

At the very least, I wanted the strength to protect Hoyeon.

I could fend off those who claimed to be “friends” with her to the best of my ability, but if they resorted to brute force, I honestly wouldn’t stand a chance.

Even though I could use magic, I was no match for someone like Stefania. Compared to her, I was practically a baby.

I could barely handle basic spells, let alone anything advanced.

“…It seems a suitable test subject has shown up at just the right time.”

His choice of words wasn’t something you’d say to a person, but I had never expected Georg to have a strong moral compass.

In the original story, though nominally a protagonist, he often behaved like a mad scientist or outright villain.

“In that case… let’s start with magical enhancement.”

With a wave of his hand, a flask filled with a dark blue substance floated toward me.

As I caught it, I felt its weight and an immediate sense of unease. I couldn’t shake the feeling that entrusting my body to someone like Georg might be a mistake, no matter how much I wanted to get stronger.

“What is this?”

I asked, holding onto a sliver of hope that it might be safer than it looked.

“It’s purified and distilled demonic energy.”

“…Demonic energy?”

It wasn’t safe at all.

It wasn’t surprising that Georg, who had devised methods to convert demonic energy into mana or holy power, was dabbling in such things.

But to work with demonic energy here, at the academy, under the watchful eyes of the church?

He really was insane.

“I understand your concerns. But there’s no need to worry. Theoretically, it doesn’t affect the body or mind. Physically, you’ll remain an ordinary human. That means holy power won’t reject you, and all you’ll gain is the ability to manipulate demonic energy. Additionally, you might increase the amount of mana you can handle.”

He launched into a long explanation, trying to reassure me with complex theories, but none of it sank in.

Whatever he said, it was still demonic energy.

Even if Georg insisted it was safe, I hesitated, knowing how badly demonkin could be ruined by it.

Just then, an image of Hoyeon surrounded by those strong, corrupt individuals flashed through my mind.

Could I protect her in my current state?

"…Professor Georg, let me ask you one thing. Is this truly safe?"

"Do you doubt my skill? That's a fine attitude for a scholar, but it's not like you're in a position to be picky right now."

He had a point.

The narrative had already spiraled out of control, and who knew what kind of events might occur in the future?

To overcome unknown threats…

I needed to get stronger.

When I opened the flask, an indescribable odor wafted out.

"Don't hesitate. If anything goes wrong, I'll rebuild your body from scratch and restore you. Drink it."

If drinking tar felt like this, I could imagine the sensation. It was sticky, hard to swallow, and seemed to bring up everything I'd eaten the day before, only for the viscous demonic energy to force it back down.

I braced myself for the pain to come, closing my eyes, but even after a full minute, nothing happened.

"…Why isn't anything happening?"

"What did you think I gave you, Han Dogeon?"

As Georg had claimed, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

Still, I couldn't shake my unease. Who knew what might happen if I came into contact with holy power?

"…But isn't there still a risk if I encounter holy power?"

"Did you even listen to my explanation, young man? Stand still."

When he pulled a rusted necklace from a pocket of subspace and thrust it in front of me, nothing happened.

"…What exactly is this?"

"It's a necklace that once belonged to a saint. Blessed by the goddess, it still radiates holy power. Still don't get it? Even when exposed to holy power, you're perfectly fine."

Well, I supposed it wasn't surprising, given he was part of the Hero's Party.

To be honest, I couldn't feel the holy power at all, but since Georg said so himself, I'd have to believe him… or at least try to. Though, if I was being truly honest, I still didn't fully trust him.

But now, I had to.

"In that case, Dogeon, let's begin by having you cast every spell you know."

As if I weren't about to be treated like a lab rat.

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…He's late.

Where had Dogeon gone since morning? I hadn't seen a shadow of him all day.

Was he so shocked by what I'd said yesterday? I mean, I was shocked too, so it wouldn't be surprising if he was as well.

Did he hate me now?

No, he cared about me enough to worry like that, so it probably wasn't hatred. Still, I was scared.

I ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner all alone.

I tried to console myself, saying it wasn't any different from before, but once you've experienced eating with someone, it's hard to go back.

Dogoeon didn't show up until just before bedtime.

"…Hi, Hoyeon."

He looked utterly exhausted.

This guy—had he finally been fooling around with some other woman?

But then again, there wasn't any scent of another person on him. My sense of smell was sharp enough to be sure of that.

Instead, he reeked of something musty, like you'd smell in an apothecary.

"…Hi, Dogeon."

He looked like he was ready to collapse, so I figured I should let him rest. He seemed in even worse shape than I had been yesterday.

"Hoyeon, do I… look different? Or strange to you?"

The fact that he was asking something like this made it clear—he must have overworked himself to the point of breaking. Whatever he'd been doing, it didn't seem enjoyable.

"Um… I don't know. Did you… cut your hair? No? Earrings? A ring…?"

I was just guessing blindly, but I really couldn't tell.

What I could tell was that he was utterly spent.

“More than that… aren’t you sleepy?”

To me, he looked like a grad student surviving on caffeine after 54 hours.

“Thanks for worrying, but I’m more awake now than ever.”

Sure, he was. That was the kind of thing you’d say right before passing out.

This wasn’t just his body breaking down; even his mind was shot.

“…Hoyeon?”

I grabbed his hand. Even though we were right in front of the dorm, he looked like he’d fall asleep halfway up the stairs and just stay there.

“You can’t push yourself like this. Go to sleep.”

See? He didn’t even resist when I tugged on him; he just stumbled along.

“Whatever you’ve been doing… just get some rest tonight.”

I could always ask him about it tomorrow.

Maybe he’d had a one-on-one with a professor. Why was he this drained, though?

“…Thanks, Hoyeon. But I’m really fine.”

Even a man should know when to give in, and for Dogeon, that time was now.

I could’ve just left him, but seeing him trying so hard to insist he was okay made me worry he’d stay up all night just to prove his point.

…What a handful.

Sighing, I followed him naturally into his room.

“…Hoyeon?”

“I’m staying until you go to sleep. Now hurry up and sleep.”

Normally, I wouldn’t have followed him in, but this wasn’t a normal situation. Even by his definition of friendship, this was justified.

“Thanks for worrying, but—”

As Dogeon closed the door, an odd energy began radiating from him.

It wasn’t divine, but it wasn’t mana either—it was something in between.

Wrapped in that dark blue energy, his body seemed to regain vitality.

What was this? What was happening? Did he always know how to do this?

“See? I told you. I’m fine.”

As the dark blue energy dissipated, Dogeon looked genuinely fine, just as he’d claimed.

…What?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 63

Chapter 63: A Joke

Something felt off.

It wasn’t as unpleasant as mana, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t normal either.

It was similar to the sensation I got back when I was bored and ordered some slime from the internet as a guy—it was just weird.

At first glance, it felt like pure energy untouched by the will of a deity, but with just a bit more focus, it became clear that it was something entirely different.

It felt like an attempt to mimic energy by forcibly blending together various unrelated components.

If I had to define it, I guess I’d call it that. Though honestly, I wasn’t even sure if it was energy.

More importantly, whatever it was, it had clearly healed Dogeon.

Seriously… What was it?

Maybe he’d stumbled onto some miraculous opportunity or item, as protagonists often do.

Protagonists in stories tend to grow stronger by jumping off waterfalls or finding hidden chambers, so I figured it was only a matter of time before

Dogeon brought back some kind of power-up.

But this?

"…What is that?"

I hadn't expected him to bring back something this strange.

If he had used mana, I could've just written him off as a stubborn fool, but this—I couldn't ignore.

How could I not be curious when my friend was messing with something so odd?

"…Hoyeon. From now on, don't tell anyone about what I'm about to say."

"Uh… okay?"

Was he about to confess something? Dogeon put a finger to his lips, urging me to keep his secret.

What could it possibly be? He was making me incredibly curious.

"Fine. I won't tell anyone. Just tell me—what is that?"

"It's purified and distilled demonic energy. Professor Georg gave it to me."

Demonic energy—wasn't that supposed to be something divine beings dealt with?

Wait. So it was energy. What had they done to it to make it so unrecognizable?

And why did that psycho professor even have something like that? More importantly, why had he given it to Dogeon?

It was so sudden and out of place that I didn't even know how to react.

…Wait. If that stuff went into his body, wasn't that incredibly dangerous? Didn't the books say it would burn you from the inside out?

"…Dogeon, are you okay?! Stay still—I'll do something about it!"

Normally, handling divine energy required the deity's permission, but given the circumstances, I didn't have time for that.

I could manipulate small amounts of energy, but I wasn't sure if I could handle something so twisted.

I'd failed to manage even basic divine energy or mana before—how could I possibly deal with something this warped?

…But he was my friend. I had no choice but to try!

If it came to it, I'd summon a deity if I had to—

"Like I said earlier, I'm perfectly fine. I'm not in any pain. You're worried about divine energy, right?"

Unlike me, who was practically panicking, Dogeon was as calm as could be. His nonchalance only made me more anxious.

He looked like someone who had resigned themselves to their fate.

"Hoyeon. You can sense divine energy, can't you?"

"Yes. But… why are you asking me that all of a sudden?"

I had no reason to hide it, so I answered, though I felt uneasy. Why was he making me so nervous?

"Then you can see it. Good. Explaining it a hundred times wouldn't be as effective as showing you once."

With that, Dogeon pulled a small pouch from his pocket.

He was being so cryptic it was driving me crazy.

“This holds the necklace of a saint. Professor Georg tossed it to me, saying it was useless, but apparently, it still emits divine energy.”

If what he said was true, I should’ve felt a strong surge of divine energy, but I didn’t.

However, the moment he opened the pouch, a wave of divine energy so strong it made me gag burst out.

“…Ugh!”

The sheer intensity made it impossible to keep my expression neutral, but when I thought about that energy overwhelming Dogeon, I snapped back to my senses.

“…Dogeon!! …Huh?”

By everything I knew, Dogeon should’ve been reduced to ashes by now.

Instead, he was smiling and casually putting the necklace on.

Oh, thank goodness.

I was so relieved nothing happened.

…But still.

I placed both hands on his shoulders and gripped with all my strength.

“…Never.”

Even with my lack of physical strength, putting my all into it was enough to pull Dogeon down to eye level.

His expression carried a faint hint of guilt—he must’ve realized he’d gone too far. But it wasn’t enough.

“Pull a prank like that again…”

Seriously, I thought he was going to die.

"…And I won't forgive you."

I stared directly into his eyes as I said it, making sure my meaning was clear.

But his face still had that smirk—one that practically invited me to hit him. It was so infuriating that I considered slapping him, but decided that was too much.

"…Got it. I'll remember that."

What was he even smiling about?

There was no "goodnight" from me tonight. I let go of him roughly and left his room.

If he'd at least tried to hold me back, I might've softened up, but letting me leave so easily only made me angrier.

…What a cheeky guy.

It looked like tonight's sleep would be anything but peaceful.

Dogeon was starting to realize he'd gone too far with the joke.

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My shoulder still ached from Hoyeon's grip. It had been a long time since she got this angry—probably not since the gym incident.

But this time, at least, she hadn't frozen up like before.

Hoyeon's aura of intimidation was strange.

Unlike the Black Wolf, there was no real sense that she was out to kill me.

After experiencing actual murderous intent once, I figured I could withstand her level of pressure.

That's probably why, even when her glare was intense enough to make me imagine her eyes glowing yellow, I managed to keep my composure this time.

Or maybe it was because I'd grown stronger after receiving the demonic energy. Either way, it was a good thing. I just needed to apologize to Hoyeon properly as soon as possible.

She was clearly upset.

The fact that she left without even saying goodbye made it obvious. My attempt to reassure her that the divine energy couldn't hurt me by smiling must've backfired.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit happy that she got mad. It showed how much she genuinely cared about me, and I couldn't dislike that.

…Once again, I summoned the pseudo-demonic energy and concentrated it on my shoulder.

The energy oozed and wrapped around the bruised area Hoyeon had gripped so hard, quickly healing it.

As expected of a beastfolk, her strength was no joke.

She didn't seem to have any connection to physical training, so where did she get that kind of power?

Thinking about my inevitable fight with Jeongho, who had defeated the Black Wolf, made my head spin.

How was I supposed to beat someone like that? The balance of power felt completely skewed. I wanted to complain to the author for breaking the power balance.

But complaining wouldn’t change anything. My only option was to get stronger.

For Hoyeon’s sake.

As for the harem… that was a problem for me in the future. Right now, I don’t have the means or confidence to handle it.

The thought of dealing with byeolbi crossed my mind, but it felt laughable to think about building a harem when I couldn’t even properly protect Hoyeon.

With the original story’s events now uncertain, the only thing I could trust was my own strength.

First, though, I needed to cheer up Hoyeon.

Tomorrow morning, I’d get up early and buy her favorite strawberry milk. The quality at Amaurus Academy was ridiculously high—so was the price.

But if it could soothe Hoyeon’s anger, it’d be worth it.

With that thought, I went to bed.

When I woke up the next day, the sun was already high in the sky. Morning had long since passed.

Apparently, I’d gotten too used to Hoyeon waking me up every morning over the past month.

Still, I got up, cleaned up quickly, and headed to the convenience store.

The strawberry milk was outrageously expensive at 10 silver coins, but imagining how happy Hoyeon would be made it tolerable.

How they priced a single carton of strawberry milk on par with several pet accessories, I’d never know. But then again, this was an academy for nobles.

Living off the money Hoyeon gave me and what I earned running errands for professors, this was definitely a splurge.

In the original story, the protagonist was supposed to have direct interactions with the headmaster. Why was it that, aside from Hoyeon and Anya, no one else approached me?

Regardless, I bought the strawberry milk and went to Hoyeon's door, knocking.

"Hoyeon, I got strawberry milk for you."

Normally, she would've answered immediately, but this time there was no response for a while. I must've really upset her.

I heard some rustling and shuffling from inside before Hoyeon finally opened the door and appeared.

"…You bought this for me? Admirable. Now, hand it over."

"Before that… could you accept one more thing from me?"

Her use of the formal princess tone—reserved for when she was angry—made it clear she wasn't planning to forgive me easily.

That said, her slowly wagging tail betrayed her true feelings.

"…And what else is it that you wish to give me?"

"An apology… Will you accept it?"

Honestly, considering her mood, I doubted she'd accept it, but it was better to try than not.

"…Hmph. I don't need an apology. Just hand over the strawberry milk."

So, she wasn't planning to let it slide. I'd suspected as much when she used that tone, but I'd hoped otherwise.

“Understood. Here’s the strawberry milk. I’ll take my leave now.”

Not wanting to risk further upsetting her, I turned to leave.

“…Wait. Don’t go just yet.”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 64

Chapter 64: A Precious Vote

As I sipped on the strawberry milk, watching his face only made him seem more insufferable.

I'd have preferred if he groveled miserably for forgiveness, but instead, he simultaneously adopted the attitude of a condemned prisoner awaiting execution and a criminal already pardoned.

His expression was clear: I know I did wrong, but you're going to forgive me anyway, right?

When I told him to leave, I was half-serious, but who actually listens and leaves when told to do so?

…Fine, I appreciated him bringing me strawberry milk at the right moment, but that was one thing, and this was another.

I was still debating whether to scold him or praise him. If I thought about what he did yesterday, he deserved to be punished a hundred times over, but the strawberry milk was stopping me.

Still, seeing Han Dogeon's faintly smiling face made me want to punish him all over again.

This cycle kept repeating. It was far from ideal.

"…So. You understand what you did wrong, right?"

I was still sucking on the strawberry milk, but I figured my emotions were clearly conveyed.

His smile dimmed a little. However, regaining his composure quickly, he smoothly answered my question.

“Despite Her Highness’s concern, I acted in a way that seemed to disregard my life. I do admit it was an extreme prank.”

Oh? A prank, you say?

While I thought the sky was falling because I genuinely believed he was going to die, Dogeon apparently thought it was just a prank.

…I couldn’t just let that slide.

I set the strawberry milk down with a clatter and glared at him.

“You call that a prank?”

“…I admit I went too far. I’ll reflect on my actions.”

Hmph. Pretending to reflect now only makes it worse. The only moment he could have genuinely apologized was right after pulling that stunt with divine power.

And even then, he should’ve panicked and said sorry instead of wearing that lukewarm smile.

How could someone who saw firsthand how shocked I was behave like that in the moment?

Laughing? I almost broke down crying, thinking he might actually die. Of course, I didn’t, and that’s why we’re both sitting here now.

“…Fine. You seem to be reflecting a little. So…”

I picked up the strawberry milk and took another sip. The rising heat in me started to subside again.

Since things ended well enough and he even brought me exactly what I wanted as an apology, was there any need to keep berating him?

He was a dear friend, after all. Dogeon also acted quickly to prove he wasn't affected by divine power.

Thinking about it, Dogeon had plenty of redeeming qualities.

Compared to protagonists in other stories who run away claiming they did nothing wrong, he practically looked like a saint.

Fine. Let's end it here. Last time, I used my foot, so this time…

"Come here."

"Yes."

Still kneeling in front of me, Dogeon shuffled closer, and I firmly pressed my hand on his head.

"Ow, ow…"

The fact that he didn't make a sound when I stomped on him but now complained under my hand might've made me push harder without realizing it.

"…Sigh. I'm begging you. Please don't pull stunts like that again, okay?"

When I released my iron claw hold, Dogeon rubbed his forehead and responded sincerely to my request.

"I'll say it again: I'll keep it in mind. I won't pull any pranks that'll scare you like that in the future. Really."

The way he phrased it, it felt like he was saying he'd still pull pranks, just not the scary kind. I couldn't tell if I was being paranoid or if Dogeon was really the type to make that distinction.

I didn't know. I'd better just finish my strawberry milk.

“Is it good?”

“…Yeah.”

…Could it be? Did Dogeon bring this on purpose, knowing I’d react this way? What a sly guy.

Still, it was delicious, so I’d let it slide. The creamy milk combined with luxurious whipped cream flavor and soft strawberry essence was truly delightful.

No joke, it was like tasting happiness the moment it touched my tongue.

But it wasn’t perfect food—it was expensive. After a month at Amaurus Academy, I knew it wasn’t something I could afford to drink whenever I wanted.

Did he really buy this expensive drink just for me? He didn’t seem to have much to spare, so it was touching.

…No, wait. In novels, protagonists’ pockets are like treasure chests owned by heroic kings—endlessly replenished.

A guy who buys his own clothes at department stores with his own money must have cash popping up from nowhere.

Might as well take advantage while I can.

“So… Is apologizing the only reason you came today?”

Wasn’t there something fun, like suggesting a place to hang out? Did he really just come here to apologize?

…Not that I minded hanging out with him. It was fun enough just being together. But people are greedy creatures who always want ‘a little more.’

“Well… for now, yeah. But, Hoyeon, did you vote?”

Vote?

…What, do they elect kings here? Or principals? This being an utterly chaotic academy setting, I wouldn't be surprised if they did.

Wait. Was there even a vote happening?

Listening to Dogeon, I racked my brain trying to figure out what he was talking about, but nothing came to mind.

When I shook my head at him once or twice, he spoke in a reassuring tone.

"You might not know about it. Want to go vote then? It's to decide the destination for the school trip, and it'd be nice to end up somewhere you like."

Oh, right. Come to think of it, there was something like that.

But… wouldn't something like that usually already be decided? Considering how long it would take to gather student opinions and choose a destination, it seemed inefficient.

Besides, it wouldn't make a difference whether someone like me voted or not.

"…But, do we really need to vote? In the end, the higher-ups will decide anyway."

"Do you really think so?"

Dogeon asked, as if he didn't agree with my opinion.

To be honest, if I hadn't grown up on the Eastern Continent, I might've thought the same as him. But after personally witnessing the gods, things like voting or democracy just seemed too tedious.

"If you entrust all decisions to the most competent person, isn't that enough? It just… feels like a cumbersome process."

"But no one like that exists. And even if there were, there's no guarantee their decisions would satisfy everyone. That's why voting is the best

method everyone can at least accept… that's how I see it."

Hmm. As expected, the most reasonable-sounding answer was democracy.

"I see… Fine. Let's go vote."

It wasn't something I could change anyway, and as a student right now, I decided to just go along with it.

Dogeon didn't seem to have any intention of lecturing me further on the importance of voting.

He dusted off his pants, got up, and headed towards the student council building, where the voting booths were set up.

"Since you didn't even know there was a vote, I guess you haven't thought of a destination yet. So… where would you like to go?"

On the way, Dogeon asked where I'd want to travel.

I had no idea. Traveling wasn't something I'd ever thought about. I'd lived keeping my distance from the word "travel."

Coming to see Dogeon had been an exception. He's the protagonist of this world, so I came to see him. It wasn't because of the academy.

"…I don't know."

"Don't know? Not even some island or the Great Forest of the Elves?"

"Nope."

The sights around the academy were more than enough for me. There's a department store and even a zoo—why bother traveling?

"Maybe you'll know when you get there. For now, the Great Forest of the Elves and an island in the east are the strongest candidates. There are others, but they're not as popular."

“I see.”

An island or a forest didn’t particularly interest me. The thought that my one vote wouldn’t make a difference kept circling in my mind.

Still, Dogeon seemed determined to see me cast a vote, so… if I had to pick, the forest seemed better.

Apparently, the trees in that clearing are descendants of the World Tree itself. That thing I keep fiddling with in my pocket must be a fruit—or something similar—of the World Tree.

Though my mother said it was fine, I might’ve stolen something far too significant.

“Is something bothering you?”

“Huh…? No, nothing.”

Dogeon’s question came at a pretty bad time, but I managed to smooth it over.

I wasn’t sure, but the Great Forest might have the original World Tree. If so, how much easier would it be to breathe there? The thought alone was exciting.

When we arrived at the student council building, we found a surprisingly well-prepared voting station set up in one corner.

They’d even made example images and pamphlets to highlight the advantages of each location. But since my mind was already made up, I didn’t bother looking at them.

I stamped my vote on the ballot, dropped it into the box, and walked out with light steps.

Dogeon followed shortly after, appearing from the other side.

“What did you pick?”

Honestly, I couldn’t resist asking what he voted for.

Dogeon didn’t seem intent on keeping it a secret and answered readily.

“The Great Forest of the Elves. And you?”

“I chose the same. What an astonishing coincidence.”

As we chatted idly on the way back to the dorms, someone stepped in our path.

Looking up, I saw that it was Stefania.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 65

Chapter 65: The Night Before

“Oh my, what a coincidence to see you here. Lady Hoyeon and… hmm, a male student? Might I ask your name?”

Standing before Hoyeon, I greeted them as politely as possible. If she tried anything, I wanted to be ready to protect Hoyeon.

Even as I maintained composure, I could feel the demonic energy within me reacting to her presence, making me tense up.

Georg had said that my demonic energy would automatically respond to danger.

And indeed, this woman was a dangerous individual, the type who exuded peril just by locking eyes. Talking to her only heightened the threat.

Although I had only known about her through information before, now my very body signaled that she was dangerous.

She was undoubtedly the one responsible for the surprise midterm attack that wasn’t in the original story. I should’ve been more vigilant, but perhaps I’d grown lax in Hoyeon’s company.

“My name is Han Dogeon. It’s an honor to meet you, Lady Stefania.”

“Han Dogeon… Han Dogeon… Oh, the commoner who recently enrolled in the academy? Your story is rather well-known. But… Why are you by Lady Hoyeon’s side?”

It was rare for someone as quick-witted as Stefania to hesitate, so it seemed I still wasn't within her circle of interest.

That was fortunate, but her interest in Hoyeon was the real problem.

Despite being the daughter of a count, she had the audacity to toy with the children of dukes and even challenge royalty as if she were their equal. If Stefania decided to do something to Hoyeon, I had no way of stopping her.

Moreover, I couldn't think of a proper response to her question. Officially, the princess and I were nothing more than an aristocrat and a commoner. I couldn't simply call her a friend.

The only tenuous connection we shared was having similar names of Eastern origin.

As I struggled, Hoyeon stepped forward, standing before me.

"Why is he by my side? Because he's my friend."

"Oh my, so the two of you are close? Then Iris wasn't lying…?"

And with that, Stefania suddenly pressed a big, bright red button.

Good grief.

Though she covered her mouth with her fan at Hoyeon's words, I caught a glimpse of the ominous curve of her lips, making it hard to breathe.

And she'd mentioned Iris.

While I knew Iris had fled, she'd been completely out of sight since then, leaving me uneasy. It seemed Stefania might've had something to do with it.

More importantly, hadn't Hoyeon herself once said she cared about maintaining her public image? How was I supposed to take this?

"Does it bother you?"

“Not at all, Lady Hoyeon. I was just momentarily surprised to find that the rumors weren’t completely unfounded. I apologize if I caused any offense.”

“It’s fine. Now state your business here.”

Hoyeon pushed forward unfazed, her position as a princess allowing her to disregard politeness. Stefania, for her part, opted to back down gracefully.

“Oh my, was it that obvious? I merely wished to formally invite you to the small soirée I’m hosting in a few days.”

So she’d come to “invite” us to a party. At least that was somewhat of a relief.

“I was planning on attending anyway, so don’t pester me about it.”

Hoyeon deftly kept the conversation short, clearly indicating that she had no time to waste on Stefania.

There were only a handful of people who could handle Stefania so bluntly, and Hoyeon turned out to be one of them.

“Very well. Then I shall take my leave. Do enjoy the rest of your time together.”

Her voice remained composed, but Stefania’s pride was visibly bruised. She quickly regained her poise, however, and even managed to tease us with a light jab.

Her tone was sweet, but the subtext was clear: Are you two dating?

That unnecessary parting remark suggested strange rumors would soon be circulating.

Then again, judging by her words, it seemed the rumors were already out there.

“Hoyeon, didn’t you once say you cared about your public image?”

I barely held back a sigh as I addressed her. Hoyeon seemed slightly apologetic, as if she understood my concerns.

“Well… Stefania asked you a difficult question, so I wanted to help…”

So that was why she took such a high-handed approach to push Stefania away. I could somewhat understand her reasoning.

But that didn’t change the fact that giving Stefania ammunition was not the smartest move.

“Hoyeon, that was something I needed to handle myself. I appreciate the help, but there was no need for you to make things harder for yourself.”

I spoke firmly to make my point clear.

“But if we let Stefania know, then everyone will realize we’re friends, won’t they?”

“Yes, and that’s the prob—”

I started to reply but stopped when I saw her eyes.

There was a dangerous glint in them.

“If it’s not something we can hide forever, then wouldn’t it be better for everyone to just know? Then we wouldn’t have to worry about what others think… If everyone knows, then…”

“Hoyeon!”

Sensing her thoughts veering in a troubling direction, I urgently interrupted her train of thought.

“Huh? Did you call me?”

Looking at her again, the dangerous glint was gone from her eyes. For some reason, I felt I shouldn’t press her on what she’d been thinking.

“Yeah. You suddenly went quiet.”

“…Did I? Sorry! I guess I got lost in thought for a moment… Let’s head back.”

She didn’t seem to remember. I decided not to bring it up. What little I’d heard made me think it was better not to know more.

“Alright.”

***

Time passed without incident. Occasionally, Anya would stop by, but it was an otherwise peaceful routine.

Peaceful… but dull. In a world without the internet or games, a loner like me didn’t have much to do. Novels were entertaining, but they didn’t compare to games or comics.

Drifting through days like a piece of floating wood, I eventually arrived at the night before the party.

“Goodnight! Sweet dreams!”

“You too.”

After our now-habitual exchange of goodnight greetings, I returned to my room, feeling lonelier than ever.

…More importantly, what should I wear tomorrow? Since I’d told Stefania I was coming, skipping out wasn’t an option.

Might as well pick out an outfit. I wasn’t sleepy anyway.

I leapt out of bed and turned on the light. Then, I opened my journal.

I wasn’t sure how much my mother knew about fashion, but she’d surely know more than I did. Besides, she’d likely be free around this time.

-Mother, if you have a moment, could you help me choose an outfit?

I wrote the note and placed the journal back down, confident she'd see it soon. In the meantime, I opened my wardrobe.

The sight of the stuffed wardrobe still felt alien to me. I'd never owned this many clothes in either my past life or my current one.

Even if I removed all the casual clothes and left only the dresses, there were still a considerable number.

I set aside the first dress I ever bought… It wasn't suited for something like a condolence party. I'd save it for another occasion.

As I carefully sifted through the options, one outfit caught my eye.

It was a dress Anya had insisted would suit me. While it left my shoulders exposed, it didn't show any cleavage, nor was the back cut out.

It seemed just right. For a first choice, I thought I wasn't too bad at this whole fashion thing.

Feeling pleased with myself, I changed into the dress and stood in front of the mirror. As I'd hoped, it was perfectly modest and unassuming.

The neutral, monochrome tone also appealed to me. Now, all that remained was to show it to my mother for approval.

Since most of the journal's features worked reliably, I was confident this one would too. I held it up and aimed it directly at myself.

After a moment, the surface of the journal shimmered like water, and a different scene appeared.

A familiar view—and a familiar person.

"Mother… Can you see me?"

Though the communication worked, I wasn't sure if video transmission would function, so I asked to confirm.

"Yes, my dear child. I see you clearly. It's been two months since we last saw each other's faces. Have you been well?"

"…Yes!"

So it worked. As expected of my mother, truly remarkable. I answered with a heart full of emotion.

"Ah, Hoyeon! Have you been well?"

Another voice joined in—deep, dignified, but oddly warm.

It was my father's voice. He must've returned victorious from the war. The journal's view shifted, revealing his face, likely turned by my mother.

He had new scars.

"Father!"

"Yes, Hoyeon. It's been a while. Are your studies going well? Have you made friends? No trouble from simpletons, I hope?"

Still as concerned as ever, my father bombarded me with questions. I laughed heartily, trying to ease his worries.

"I'm doing well, Father. How have you been?"

"It's been lonely without you in the palace. But seeing you well puts me at ease. Is there anything troubling you? If so, your father—"

"Dearest, you worry too much. The child is an adult now and can manage herself."

"…Yes, you're right, my dear."

As always, my mother had my father firmly under her control.

Two months wasn't a long time, but the fact that nothing had changed since I left brought a smile to my face.

"So… you want us to check your outfit?"

"Yes, Mother."

I propped the journal upright on my desk and stepped back, posing to show the front, back, and sides of the dress to both my parents. Then, I awaited their feedback.

"As expected of my daughter. You look good in anything!"

"You look lovely, my child. But tell me, where are you going that requires such preparation?"

While my father showered me with unconditional praise, my mother questioned the purpose of my attire.

"Ah, I'm attending a soirée…"

"In that case, the dress is far too plain. Try something else."

Before I could even finish my explanation, my mother had already rejected the dress outright.

…This was starting to feel ominous.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 66

Chapter 66: Party (1)

It wasn’t that I doubted my mother’s decision.

She had explained in detail what kind of party it was, and after reviewing all the outfits, she personally recommended this one to me.

…Still, I couldn’t help but wonder—was this really the right choice?

Compared to the dress quietly slumbering in my closet, this was considerably more modest, though, relatively speaking, it was still quite revealing.

No matter how much I thought about it, I liked the outfit I had first shown to my mother the best…

But if she said this one suited me the most, then there wasn’t much I could do about it.

Before stepping out, I stood in front of the mirror for a final check.

Against the backdrop of black fabric with white patterns, my hair stood in stark contrast. The neckline showed a hint of cleavage, and the back was slightly open.

It felt like someone had taken the modest pieces from my wardrobe and combined them into this outfit.

At least my back wasn't completely exposed—thankfully. Anything more, and it would've been hard to tell if it was clothing or just scraps of fabric.

I carefully examined myself in the mirror to ensure there weren't any loose threads or dust and that my hair wasn't still damp. Once I confirmed everything was fine, I grabbed the invitation.

The invitation doubled as an entry pass, so I held onto it tightly. It'd be embarrassing to get turned away after all the effort I'd put into dressing up.

Apparently, I just needed to sign it… though I wasn't exactly sure what that meant. I figured I could ask Dogeon.

After steadying my breath, I stepped out and knocked on Dogeon's door.

"Just a moment…"

Unlike me, it seemed like he had just woken up. I could hear rustling from inside his room and imagined the disorganized scene that would greet me if I opened the door.

It seemed like his room could use a good cleaning. The last time he explained what "friends" meant, his place had been a disaster, too.

I supposed I'd have to rely on my deep reserves of patience and wait.

Listening leisurely to the sounds of him moving around inside, I didn't have to wait long before Dogeon opened the door and stepped out.

"Sorry to… keep you waiting."

Dogeon paused mid-sentence and stared at me for a moment before continuing.

In that brief moment, I noticed a hint of redness creep across his face, which stirred a small sense of unease. Did it not suit me? Such doubts, though baseless, were hard to suppress.

"…Does it not suit me?"

I struck a slight pose, turning around to show him the front and back as I asked.

My mother had a vastly different perspective on the world, so it was possible she had recommended something incomprehensible to our sense of style.

It did look fine to me, but my own opinion wasn't very reliable.

There was no choice but to ask Dogeon.

Asking Anya would only result in unthinking praise.

"…No. It's… you're stunning. Don't worry, Hoyeon. It suits you perfectly."

"Really? You look good, too."

Even briefly doubting my mother had been a mistake. As expected, she was well-versed in fashion.

Now that I thought about it, Dogeon had also dressed sharply. It wasn't the kind of gaudy, gold-plated attire that royalty in fantasies might wear but a dignified black suit, similar to mine.

At least this way, other girls wouldn't start conversations with him first. There were plenty of men here who looked like they belonged in a well-written novel, after all.

"Do I? Thanks for saying that. Did you bring your invitation?"

Dogeon, clearly pleased, responded enthusiastically to my compliment. In response to his question, I took out my invitation as proof.

"Here. But what does it mean to 'sign' it, exactly?"

"Hmm… I'm not sure about that, either."

I had planned to ask Dogeon, but he didn't know, either. That left us with no choice but to figure it out ourselves.

“Well, let’s give it a try.”

“Right… I mean, they wouldn’t pull anything strange at an event like this…”

Dogeon seemed uneasy about the fact that the invitation had come from Stefania. He had been wary of her ever since yesterday.

Still, it seemed excessive to be so suspicious. It wasn’t like the party invitation was secretly a body relinquishment agreement or anything.

“Don’t worry. What could possibly happen?”

Honestly. Causing trouble here would only tarnish her own reputation; there was no way she’d pull something weird.

“…Right. Let’s do it, then.”

Dogeon naturally retrieved a pen and handed one to me before writing his name on the invitation. He paused midway.

“…Companion, huh.”

The invitation Stefania had given us included a section to list a companion if we had one.

For a moment, I felt a bit annoyed at the assumption, but it didn’t take long to realize that, for nobles, having a companion was a given.

I felt briefly discouraged, but then I remembered—I had Dogeon.

“Right here. Your companion.”

As I poked Dogeon in the side with my pen, he turned to look at me with a bewildered expression.

What’s with that look?

Was he still hung up on yesterday’s events?

It seemed like he was still hesitant about openly announcing to everyone that we were friends. It felt like he was doing this out of consideration for me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that, someday, he might build a harem and pretend not to know me when it suited him.

Well then, if everyone knew, he wouldn't be able to pull that off, would he?

I wrote Dogeon's name in the companion section of my invitation. Watching me, he seemed resigned and wrote my name in the companion section of his invitation.

That's how it should be.

"…So, what happens now?"

The moment Dogeon finished what sounded suspiciously like a setup line, a surge of mana—similar to what had happened during midterms—began to swirl around us.

Was it teleportation again? What if I ended up in some strange place all by myself?

Anxiety washed over me, and I instinctively grabbed Dogeon's hand tightly.

Even as we were enveloped in the storm of mana and dizziness set in, I didn't let go of his hand. Perhaps because of that, when I opened my eyes, Dogeon was still beside me.

"Welcome, esteemed guests. I am Angelo, the steward. Are you Lady Baek Hoyeon and her companion, Lord Han Dogeon?"

"Yes," I replied.

"That's correct," Dogeon added.

"Please, step inside. I hope you have a pleasant time," said Angelo with a bow.

Though he seemed to be treating Dogeon as a mere accessory, I let it slide. After all, this was a fantasy world where social hierarchies were an accepted reality.

From beyond the door, the scents of perfume and the sounds of music wafted toward us. It seemed the party had already started.

Thinking it was just a student-run event and would therefore be modest, I opened the door—and was greeted by an entirely unexpected scene.

A hall dazzlingly decorated, with an orchestra playing in one corner, and students gathered around tables, sipping drinks.

It was all very… formal.

And the sheer number of people made it a bit suffocating.

Even without anyone's gaze on me, the sheer density of the crowd made me instinctively shrink back.

"…Haa… Sigh."

"Oh, right. This is your first party, isn't it? Don't be too nervous. Stefania seems to have genuinely prepared this event without any underhanded schemes this time."

Seeing me take deep breaths, Dogeon offered some advice, encouraging me to relax.

Right, I just needed to relax. Who would dare approach a couple walking hand-in-hand, anyway?

Honestly, the reason I chose such a simple outfit was that I was afraid of anyone coming up to me.

"…By the way, Lady Hoyeon, how long do you plan on holding my hand?"

It seemed Dogeon wanted me to let go.

“It sounds as though you want me to let go.”

Come to think of it, while a modest outfit could prevent people from approaching me, it couldn’t stop Dogeon from acting up.

Who knew the solution would be so simple? All I had to do was make it clear to the world that we were friends.

“Escort… is it? I’d like to experience that for once. What do you think?”

I threw it back at him, signaling that I had no intention of letting go. He might as well give up gracefully.

Matching Dogeon’s shift to his usual formal tone, I decided to play the part of a princess.

“…Yes, ma’am,” Dogeon said, with a faintly bitter smile. He took my hand and led me into the crowd.

As I feared, many male eyes followed us, though most clicked their tongues or quickly looked away upon seeing Dogeon.

If he hadn’t been here, I might have been surrounded by one or two persistent types, panicked, and swept away by the flow.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Thankfully, nothing of the sort happened.

I felt like I’d made the right decision this time, but there was still one lingering gaze fixed on me.

Could it be that “madman” I’d been worried about? I turned to check, and sure enough, it was Geum Taeyang.

Yep, definitely a madman. Who else would just casually radiate divine energy at someone?

Still, something about him seemed oddly different from before. He was wearing an eyepatch now, and a few of his left-hand fingers were missing.

It seemed he'd been injured during midterms.

But other than staring, he showed no other signs of interest, so I ignored him and followed Dogeon's lead.

"…By the way, where are we headed?"

"We must eat breakfast, mustn't we? It looks like there's a dining area here. What do you say to a meal?"

I couldn't say no to food. I'd thought we were wandering aimlessly.

"Lead the way."

I was starting to get hungry, and I was curious about the party food. I wasn't expecting much, but it would be an experience, at least.

As I followed Dogeon to the dining area, I spotted an unexpected face.

"Dogeon, and Lady Hoyeon! Fancy seeing you here!"

It was Anya, seated at a table piled high with food, surrounded by her group. Among them were Exipri and a girl glaring sharply at me for some reason.

And several others I didn't recognize.

"Would you like to join us?"

Anya was enthusiastically trying to pull us toward her table, crowded with strangers.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 67

Chapter 67: Party (2)

While the students revealed in the festivities, a man and a woman were having a private conversation in a secluded corner of the space, far removed from the party's lively atmosphere.

It wasn't some romantic tale of forbidden love or anything of the sort.

"My gratitude for providing the venue… and for your various technical assistance, Professor Georg."

"Oh, think of it as simply repayment for something wonderful I've received. Thanks to you, I've found something new to explore."

"You sound almost delighted that there's a problem. How does one even think like that?"

"Of course, you wouldn't understand. You view magic as a means, not an end in itself. Isn't that right, Miss Stefania?"

"…Is that so?"

In the shadows, something moved busily. Outside the window, the party continued in full swing, but neither of them paid it any mind. Stefania, instead, handed her glass to something in the darkness.

"Angelos? My glass is empty. Refill it."

"Yes, my lady."

The being waiting in the shadows revealed itself—it was a homunculus, property of Stefania's family.

This homunculus, one of the rarest on the continent, possessed intelligence and physical abilities indistinguishable from those of a human.

Her family had amassed tremendous wealth through the use of these homunculi, as there was an endless demand for beings that were human but not quite.

“Still… turning an entire corner of your personal subspace into a party venue and handing it over? What exactly are you thinking?”

Stefania’s tone carried a hint of probing curiosity as she posed her question to Georg.

She couldn’t understand why he was being so generous after she had simply delivered a few worthless creatures turned into demons.

“You’re persistent. Very well, I’ll be blunt. I wish to continue doing business with you. The subspace and technical cooperation are gestures of goodwill.”

“Goodwill, is it? Well, that’s certainly sufficient… though I can’t exactly mass-produce demons on demand, you know.”

Georg silently sneered at Stefania’s transparent lie. Having witnessed an entire village transform into a den of demons overnight, he knew how absurd her words were.

“…Ah, of course, I could if I wanted to, but there are too many eyes on me these days. Meeting your demands every time might prove difficult,” Stefania quickly amended, sensing Georg’s suspicion.

“No need to worry about that. One per month will suffice. By the way, Miss Stefania, does your family’s black market deal in elves or beastfolk?”

“…Oh my. Whatever are you talking about?”

Stefania’s expression turned blank. While it was true that her family operated a black market, only the family members were privy to that fact.

Even the merchants, informants, and VIP clients of the black market had no idea who ran it. How could a mere university professor—former hero's party member or not—have such knowledge? Stefania felt a surge of unease.

"Do you know who killed your ancestor… Maurizio Pecci?"

"That would be the Hero… Ah."

Hearing the name of her disgraceful ancestor, Stefania let out a brief sigh.

The man who had nearly destroyed their family by clinging to every underling had apparently confessed everything. Stefania silently accepted the situation.

"…Yes, we do."

"Then bring some of them to me as well."

Realizing that she had misjudged her opponent and lost her leverage, Stefania begrudgingly listened to Georg's demands.

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Meanwhile, Hoyeon was visibly uneasy. To most, she might have appeared composed, but subtle changes in her ears and tail betrayed her nerves.

"Lady Hoyeon, are you feeling uncomfortable…?"

"No. It's nothing like that. Perhaps I'm just hungry."

Perhaps it was because the only familiar face at the table was Anya. Or maybe it was the unfriendly stares directed toward her from the others.

Anya seemed to be the leader of this gathering, which likely kept anyone from openly voicing complaints, but the underlying sentiment was palpable —What is she doing here?

Camilla's gaze, in particular, was anything but kind.

Her jealousy, a trait that had caused plenty of trouble in her harem dynamics and earned her the readers' ire, now seemed directed at Hoyeon.

It wasn't because of me—or at least, not entirely. Camilla's sharp stares were also occasionally aimed at me, albeit not as intensely as at Hoyeon.

This tension was likely the result of Anya continually singling her out.

"Oh, I see. Well then, let's eat! Here, take this."

"Lady Hoyeon, try this too! It's delicious, I promise."

"Lady Hoyeon!"

"Lady Hoyeon!"

Taking Hoyeon's casual mention of being hungry at face value, Anya kept serving her food.

"…Right. Thank you."

Hoyeon's discomfort was evident. The stares directed at her—full of curiosity and jealousy—were intense enough for even me to notice.

Yet, oblivious as ever, Anya happily continued piling food onto Hoyeon's plate.

…Sometimes, being carefree isn't a good thing.

"Lady Hoyeon, you seem full. Would you care for a drink instead?"

Seeing that she had no way of escaping, I decided to intervene. Knowing her, she wouldn't refuse a request, even if it put her in an awkward position, as long as it came from someone close to her.

It might be rude to leave after being invited, but…

Hoyeon looked utterly drained.

“…Oh, are you leaving?”

“Yes… I seem to have overeaten. Thank you for the invitation. Let’s meet again later.”

“Oh… If you’re full, then I understand. Let’s meet again soon!”

To the very end, Anya remained unaware of the awkward atmosphere and unwittingly poured fuel onto the fire.

It wasn’t malice—just a complete lack of awareness. It was hard to hold it against her.

Hoyeon and I moved quickly, putting distance between ourselves and the group until they were out of sight. Only then did Hoyeon finally relax.

“…Haa… Huff.”

She was trembling so much that I worried her princess facade might have cracked if we’d stayed any longer.

“Are you all right?”

Even I had felt the weight of the gazes directed at her. For someone with heightened senses like hers, it must have been unbearable.

Especially Camilla’s expression—it was clear that, if not for Anya’s presence, she might have confronted us outright.

Hoyeon wasn’t the only one struggling… I had my own problems, too.

By now, I should have built a connection with Camilla, but the opportunity had vanished entirely. There was no chance to interact with her at all.

Even in the original story, no further events with her had been written. I’d unexpectedly encountered Iris, but she was tightly bound to Stefania, leaving no way to help her.

When finals came, Stefania would undoubtedly try something. I could use that moment to take her down and free Iris.

But Camilla?

A headache was beginning to set in. Could I really pull this off?

"…Yes. I'm fine now. Thank you, my lord."

As I wrestled with my thoughts, I faintly heard Hoyeon speaking softly to someone. Yet, there was no one else nearby. Just as I puzzled over this, I noticed a faint thread of magical energy connecting her to something unseen.

In that instant, an idea sparked in my mind.

Perhaps there was a way to take down Stefania.

But this wasn't the right time to bring it up. It seemed as though Hoyeon had only been talking to herself. If I pressed her about it, she likely wouldn't appreciate it.

As for Camilla… I'd have to talk to Anya and arrange a separate meeting with her. Using my connection with Anya seemed like the only plausible way to get close to Camilla.

"…Ah, I feel a bit better now," Hoyeon said.

"Really? That's good to hear. In that case, should we head back to the dining area—"

"Just a little longer. Let's stay here."

Since she'd eaten much less than usual, I suggested going back for more food, but she expressed a desire to remain where we were.

Ah, she wasn't ready yet.

I waited patiently until she said she was finally ready, and then we headed back to the dining area—only to find it had already closed.

Breakfast time was over.

"…Sorry, I think I took too long," Hoyeon murmured.

"No, I should be the one apologizing. I dragged you away suddenly," I replied.

I should've chosen a quieter spot within the dining area instead of somewhere completely deserted.

As we exchanged apologies, I noticed Anya approaching from a distance. She seemed to have shaken off her entourage.

Now that I could see her properly, I realized her dress was also fairly revealing.

She really… stood out.

"…Lady Hoyeon, earlier… um, I'm sorry. I got so excited that I forgot to explain who you were…"

Anya appeared to have realized her mistake. The moment she saw us, she returned and offered an apology.

"…It's fine. Everyone makes mistakes. But I don't think I can join your group for a meal again. It's… difficult," Hoyeon replied.

"I see…"

Anya looked crestfallen at Hoyeon's decision, but it didn't last long. Soon, her usual energy returned as she shared other news with us.

"Still… you'll be attending the luncheon ball, won't you? There's plenty going on until dinner, but… the ball is essentially the highlight of this party!"

A ball, huh? That sounded promising.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 68

Chapter 68: Party (3)

A ball… I knew what it was—dancing.

…But I didn't know how to dance.

"Oh, of course, Lady Anastasia. By the way, do you have a partner?"

At the mention of the ball, Dogeon was beaming, seemingly thrilled by the prospect of dancing.

Meanwhile, I was here regretting coming to this party in the first place, feeling utterly deflated.

It took invoking the gods I hadn't spoken to in ages just to calm myself down.

"…Well, to tell you the truth, I don't have a suitable partner yet… If Lady Hoyeon wouldn't mind, I was thinking of dancing with Dogeon…"

"No. Dogeon is dancing with me."

The words escaped my lips before I even thought about them.

After all, one of my reasons for coming here was to prevent Dogeon from doing anything foolish.

Half of it was curiosity, but another key goal that developed along the way was making sure Dogeon didn't stray.

…I knew I couldn't stop him forever. But for as long as I could, I wanted to keep his attention on me.

“…I see,” Anya murmured, trailing off awkwardly. Even if she had asked as a favor between friends, I wasn’t planning on agreeing. Thankfully, she gave up quickly.

“Ugh… I guess I’ll have to settle for the person my father picked…”

Oh. It seemed Anya had her own reasons for wanting a partner. But I wasn’t going to change my mind. Today, Dogeon was sticking with me.

…Which meant I’d have to dance with him.

“…It seems I’ve found my partner. Lady Anastasia, I wish you the best of luck in finding a wonderful partner as well.”

“Thank you for the kind words… Lord Dogeon.”

I knew it was just polite conversation between friends, but hearing it still made me uncomfortable. It felt like Anya was trying to get too close to Dogeon.

“Lady Anastasia…! Oh, there you are… Ah!”

It seemed Anya had slipped away from her followers earlier. Her entourage, clearly searching for her, soon gathered around her.

The moment they spotted me, they all reacted the same way.

They froze, their expressions screaming we’re doomed.

“…Your Highness, please forgive our rudeness!”

One after another, the group began bowing and apologizing profusely.

The excuses poured out—how they hadn’t heard of the princess because they’d been stuck in the northern countryside, or on vacation with their families in the west.

Every word was a desperate plea for forgiveness.

It was pathetic.

Exipri, not understanding what was happening, joined in the apologies simply because everyone else was doing it.

Meanwhile, the girl who had been glaring at me earlier, Camilla, hung back, silently observing.

Right. I recognized her. I even remembered her name. Camilla.

We'd met before, I was sure of it—before coming to the academy.

I brushed off the apologies with a vague acknowledgment and walked past the group, stopping in front of Camilla.

"…Camilla. I have a question for you. Before coming to the academy, did we meet?"

I wanted to know if I had done something to earn her hostility.

"Oh my. You've finally remembered my name, Your Highness. What an honor. Yes, my name is Camilla. I am the daughter of a lord who governed one of the many territories you have surely passed through. We even sat at the negotiation table together once."

"Is that so? Is that why you've been glaring at me? Because you harbor resentment?"

Even now, her eyes burned with seething anger.

…Thinking back on how I conducted those negotiations, I could understand why she might be upset.

I hadn't even looked her in the eye, just demanded that she sign the documents.

But I had no intention of backing down now—not in front of Dogeon.

If I apologized once, I feared she'd press for more, so I decided to double down on my arrogance.

"…To be truthful, yes. That is why I've harbored feelings I shouldn't have toward Your Highness. I apologize. Will you accept my apology?"

In this unspoken battle of wills, it was Camilla who first backed down.

"Very well. I am magnanimous, after all."

Though she still seemed angry, I doubted she'd bother me further. I deliberately avoided mentioning my own apology—I didn't want to waste any more time on her.

"…I'll take my leave now."

Suppressing her emotions, Camilla departed. As she left, the other children, who had been hesitant to approach while she was there, quickly swarmed back, clinging to me with more pleading.

"You're in the way. I understand your words, so be gone," I said, dismissing them with as much annoyance as I could muster.

I didn't like using my authority, but it was the simplest way to deal with them.

In the ensuing confusion, I took the opportunity to grab Dogeon, who had been stuck near Anya, and made my exit.

"Lady Anastasia, I'll take my leave now. I hope you find a good partner."

"…Ah… I… I'm sorry…"

"What do you have to apologize for? Raise your head."

Anya had done nothing wrong. It was her followers who were the problem. She had invited me to her table with genuine goodwill—I couldn't hate her for that.

I didn’t want to leave her with unnecessary guilt.

“Let’s go, Dogeon.”

“…Yes, Lady Hoyeon.”

Dogeon followed me without resistance, and seeing his changed expression from earlier, I decided to let him off the hook.

Once we had escaped from Anya’s group, I checked our surroundings and spoke to Dogeon.

“…Dogeon, I spoke confidently earlier, but… I don’t actually know how to dance. Do you?”

“You dragged me into this without even knowing how to dance? I know a little, but don’t expect too much.”

He knew how—good enough.

“…Lead me.”

“Me? I’ll… try my best.”

“Just leave it to me.” That’s all he needed to say. Whether it worked or not didn’t matter.

…I’d never actually said those words before, but they were the kind of thing someone like Dogeon would say effectively, not someone like me.

“Just trust me next time,” I advised Dogeon, drawn from bitter experience.

With time to kill, I decided it might be worth learning a bit of dancing from him.

“Let’s practice now.”

“Now? It won’t help much.”

“We won’t know until we try.”

Reluctantly, Dogeon agreed, guiding me through the steps as I clumsily followed.

“When I step back, you step forward, and then—whoa!”

“Careful!”

I tripped but didn’t fall—Dogeon caught me. His hand held my waist, steadying me as we stood close.

“…Thanks. You can let go now.”

“Oh, right.”

I wanted people to know we were friends, not anything more. As awkward silence lingered, Stefania’s voice echoed through the venue.

“The ball begins in five minutes! Please gather in the central hall!”

“…That’s enough practice for now,” I said.

Dogeon nodded, unbothered. Following his lead, we moved toward the main hall, now bustling with couples chatting, laughing—and some kissing.

Undignified.

I averted my eyes, but my gaze wandered to Anya, who stood with a burly, unpleasant-looking man.

Good luck, I thought, turning away.

Soft music began, and the lights dimmed.

“It’s starting. No mistakes this time,” Dogeon reminded me.

“…That was an accident. It won’t happen again.”

Grumbling, I followed his lead. Step forward, step back—occasionally, he spun me, catching me off guard but never letting me stumble.

Then, just once, I took the lead, pulling him close.

“Lady Hoyeon…”

“Move as I say. I’ve followed you enough.”

Dancing wasn’t as boring as I thought. This might even be… fun.

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Chapter 69: Party (4)

As Hoyeon and Dogeon danced, subtly flaunting their connection for all to see, Ethan absentmindedly touched the eyepatch covering his empty eye socket.

Most of his carefully cultivated collaborators had either fled or perished during the recent attack.

Even Stefania's close associates, whom he'd painstakingly established ties with, had turned into demons and disappeared.

All he'd done was track her movements—he hadn't even revealed the truth—yet she'd executed such a thorough purge. Ethan couldn't help but feel despair.

Could he really accomplish this?

Perhaps it was time to leave this to the First Apostle.

As he pondered how to report this catastrophic failure, like a condemned man awaiting his execution, a woman in a pristine white dress approached him.

Her radiant blonde hair, green eyes, and the cross necklace she wore made her identity unmistakable. Ethan's expression darkened.

With an impassive gaze, Gloria gestured for him to follow her into the crowd.

Thinking so it has come to this, Ethan followed.

"Decatria. I've heard the news. What's the situation?"

“Most of the collaborators have abandoned us, and the close associates I cultivated have gone missing. We’re still investigating, but there’s no evidence linking the demonic attack to her. Also, my wound… it’s been corrupted by miasma and cannot be healed.”

“…Terrible. Truly dreadful.”

Gloria’s expression grew increasingly grim as she listened to Ethan’s report.

Although she wasn’t a first-year student, Stefania had extended her an invitation to the party. Gloria couldn’t discern Stefania’s intentions but decided to attend, viewing it as an opportunity.

Perhaps she wants to show me her advantage, to make me give up.

“Your abilities remain intact, I hope?”

“Yes. As you can see, I still have one eye left.”

It was a small relief, Gloria thought. Ethan’s talents were unparalleled, and losing him would have been a significant blow.

Navigating through the bustling crowd to avoid eavesdroppers, they passed close to Hoyeon and Dogeon.

The two students were smiling—whether out of happiness or amusement was unclear—and clumsily exchanging leads in their dance.

Watching them, Gloria posed a question to Ethan.

“Now that I think about it… I asked you to investigate that student. Any progress?”

“She is a princess from the Eastern Empire and appears unaffected by exposure to divine energy. That’s all.”

“Hmm. A user of miasma, yet unharmed by divine energy…”

To Gloria, this was deeply unusual. Whether beastfolk, elves, or humans, anyone imbued with miasma should be destroyed upon contact with divine energy.

Among humans, the effects were often more dramatic due to their susceptibility, but divine energy's fatal effects on miasma users were universal.

"This is all the noteworthy information I've gathered. I failed to act with sufficient caution, and for that, I take responsibility…"

"No, it's not your fault. But do better. There are plenty of candidates for the 13th Apostle, and I trust your recent shortcomings are only temporary."

"…Understood."

"Remember the creed of the Order: Always doubt, always think, always uncover."

"…Indeed."

As she departed, her words lingered—an encouraging yet threatening reminder that his position was far from secure.

Ethan desperately needed results.

His gaze lingered on Hoyeon and Dogeon as they danced.

"Like this, like this…!"

Feeling a surge of excitement, I tried to spin Dogeon around.

Unfortunately, the difference in our heights made it impossible.

How sad. If I were still my younger height, maybe it would work—or, more likely, I wouldn't be holding hands with a guy at all.

But now… well, I'm a girl, so it's not that strange, right?

“Lady Hoyeon, you seem overly excited.”

“And what of it?!”

Was I not allowed to feel excited? Dogeon’s words felt oddly critical, as though he were telling me to calm down.

But I couldn’t help it—I was having fun.

At first, I obediently followed Dogeon’s lead in the dance, but by now, I had completely taken over, practically dragging him around.

It was strange how much fun it was—moving to the rhythm of the music. How could something so simple feel so enjoyable?

At some point, I seized full control, swinging Dogeon along to my pace.

“Now, try this one…!”

As the song neared its climax, I realized it was about to end. I wanted to finish with a dramatic pose.

But my ambition got the better of me. I ended up making the very mistake I swore not to.

“Ahh—!”

Thankfully, Dogeon caught me before I face-planted into the floor. But the result wasn’t much better—I ended up leaning into his chest, my head buried there.

The humiliation of failing after declaring I wouldn’t, coupled with the embarrassment of our awkward position, made it impossible to lift my head.

“I did warn you, Lady Hoyeon. You got too excited and, well, here we are,” he said, holding me steady as he brought up my earlier mistake.

His words made my face flush even harder.

“…Silence,” I snapped, pushing him away brusquely.

Unfortunately, a few onlookers had clearly seen the whole thing and were now staring at us.

Ah. This was mortifying. And it was entirely my fault, so I couldn’t even blame anyone else.

“Everyone, I hope you’ve enjoyed yourselves! The ball is now officially over. There’s still plenty of activities left for you to enjoy throughout the day. Lunch will begin soon, so feel free to help yourselves!”

Stefania’s announcement couldn’t have come at a better time, drawing attention away from us. But it couldn’t undo what people had already seen.

“…Ugh,” I groaned.

“You were just a bit too enthusiastic. My apologies. I should have taught you better,” Dogeon said with an easy smile.

“Ah… no. You did nothing wrong. It was my inexperience…”

“Let’s leave it at that.”

This guy. He turned my apology into an admission of fault so smoothly it almost felt deliberate.

Still, I’d spent most of the dance forcing him to follow my lead, so I couldn’t really argue.

“…Let’s leave now,” I said firmly.

“Already? Shouldn’t we at least stay for lunch?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to stay any longer, risking more embarrassment…

…But lunch was free, and a quiet meal with just the two of us didn’t sound so bad.

“Fine. Lunch it is.”

“Listen here… Back in my homeland, no one approached me! Why is that?! Do I look that intimidating?!”

In the end, my attempts to connect with other heroines failed spectacularly. Hoyeon’s watchful presence left me no room to make progress.

Still, keeping her tethered to the party hall for as long as I could felt like a small victory. I even managed to briefly chat with Cecilia.

But that was the extent of my achievements.

Desperate to extend our time, I made the mistake of suggesting we try some drinks after dinner.

“No, you’re beautiful.”

“…Really? Hehe… Then why… why don’t I have any friends…?”

One drink in, and she’d already started acting strange. By the third, she was like this—completely uninhibited and rambling.

This was precisely the scenario I’d dreaded—her attracting the wrong kind of attention and getting dragged off by some unsavory types.

“Exactly… why…”

Her drunken lamentations continued as I stayed vigilant.

“Also… my father… expects so much from me. I don’t know if I can meet his expectations…”

The way she spoke, her occasional displays of swordsmanship… It was obvious her father, Jeongho, had trained her. An only daughter, cherished and heavily invested in. But for Hoyeon, that affection seemed to weigh heavily.

Drunk as she was, her words reflected a deeply personal struggle.

“You don’t need to live entirely for your father’s expectations. Just doing your best without overburdening yourself is enough.”

“…You say such things… that I want to hear. I like that about you. Did you know? At first, I really disliked you. But now… I’m fond of you. Hngh… I wish… you’d only look at me. But your heart… keeps wandering to other women…”

Her eyelids drooped as sleep overtook her, yet even in her drowsy state, she brought up what I’d been avoiding—my actions.

“Am I… not enough? Tell me… What would make you focus only on me…?”

She was calling me out for pursuing other heroines.

But I had no choice. To avoid the bad ending, I needed to conquer all of them.

Whether “all” meant one or eight, I still wasn’t certain.

If it were just one, I’d dedicate myself to Hoyeon without hesitation. But if it were the latter, this strategy was unavoidable… even if it made her unhappy.

“That’s… well…”

“Don’t bother… I know your true nature…”

She trailed off, her words interrupted by sleep.

…Great. Now what? I called her name a few times, but she didn’t stir.

Lady Byeolbi, please forgive me for what I’m about to do to your daughter.

Carefully, I hoisted her onto my back and headed for the exit.

“…Excuse me. Could you direct me to the exit?”

“Lady Baek Hoyeon and Lord Han Dogeon, correct? Please wait.”

The invitation in my pocket floated out, transforming into a doorway.

It was always impressive.

Stefania’s mastery of magic made me wonder how I’d ever stand a chance against her.

But that was a problem for another time. Right now, getting Hoyeon somewhere she could rest was the priority.

The door led us back to the corridor where we’d first signed the invitations.

However, I couldn’t take Hoyeon to her room since I lacked whatever key or mechanism she used to unlock her door.

This… was unavoidable.

I opened my door instead.

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Chapter 70: Aftermath

Ignoring the soft, warm sensation against my back and hands, I carefully carried her into my room.

Though she hadn't drunk much and didn't reek of alcohol, the faint animalistic scent unique to her tickled my nose.

I liked that scent, though growing up, my family hated anything remotely "animal-like," which meant no pets for me.

But Hoyeon was not a pet.

"…Alright, up you go."

Cradling her as if she were a precious treasure, I gently laid her on my bed.

She stirred briefly, shifting uncomfortably, then settled into a relaxed posture, her breathing even.

Seeing her sleeping so peacefully, with a faint smile on her lips, I couldn't help but think how utterly defenseless she was.

At the same time, I regretted suggesting she try alcohol.

I'd only wanted to introduce her to the experience and gauge her tolerance.

I hadn't expected her to go under after just three drinks.

As she breathed, her chest rose and fell in a mesmerizing rhythm, and without thinking, my hand moved.

And then…

“…It’s soft.”

I stroked her hair.

Her black hair, streaked with white, had always intrigued me.

It was as soft as I’d imagined, clearly well-cared for.

Even as my hand instinctively drifted toward her more tempting features, I stopped myself, remembering Byeolbi’s warning.

Though she had granted permission, I couldn’t be sure if it was genuine or a test.

Even the gods described Hoyeon as “anomalous.”

Her purpose in this world wasn’t clear in the original story, and information about Byeolbi was scarce.

All I knew was that she was close to omnipotent.

With such a being watching over Hoyeon, reckless actions weren’t an option.

…Still. Once wouldn’t hurt, right?

“Hoyeon…?”

I called her name softly, checking if she was awake.

If she opened her eyes now, I’d have no excuse.

Thankfully—or perhaps unfortunately—there was no response.

Her ears twitched slightly, but otherwise, she remained deeply asleep.

Taking a deep breath, I reached out, my hand moving as slow as a crawling ant toward her chest.

And then… contact.

No lightning struck, no divine retribution descended.

All I felt was the soft, supple texture beneath my fingers. The faint warmth of her skin, exposed through her dress, sent a strange sense of accomplishment through me.

Maybe Byeolbi's words could be taken literally after all.

Initially, I only intended to touch her briefly, but the temptation was overwhelming.

Tracing her exposed skin with my fingers, I found myself pressing further, adding more fingers until I couldn't resist squeezing lightly.

"…Hhn."

She stirred slightly at the contact, and guilt struck me like a hammer.

That had been too much.

What was so special about this, anyway?

The sensation was pleasant, sure, but was it worth betraying her trust?

Feeling a wave of shame, I decided to clean myself up.

With Hoyeon occupying the bed, I'd have to sleep on the floor tonight.

Thankfully, I had spare blankets and pillows.

Leaving her on the floor wasn't an option.

Splashing cold water on my face helped clear my head.

Drying off and changing into pajamas, I realized too late that a warm shower might've been more relaxing.

Still, the saying about a certain feature turning men into fools seemed uncomfortably accurate.

For now, I resolved to let her sleep while I tried to find my own rest.

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"…Where am I?"

A strange ceiling greeted me.

My head didn't ache, and my body felt fine, but it didn't feel like I'd gotten proper sleep.

I remembered Dogeon suggesting I try alcohol.

I'd drunk it…

But what happened after that?

My memory was blank, as though someone had erased everything after that point.

"…What in the world happened…"

I recalled dancing, watching a dull play, and eating.

Pleasant memories brought a brief smile, but they didn't explain my current situation.

Sitting up in bed, I noticed my clothes were the same as yesterday's.

The only difference was a few creases from sleeping.

The only thing removed was my shoes, which was normal for a bed.

But then I looked around the room.

The chaotic state of the surroundings seemed oddly familiar. Not uninhabitable, but far from tidy.

And then I saw him—Dogeon—sprawled out on the floor, snoring.

A girl drinks, wakes up in a guy's room.

Wait.

Why was I in Dogeon's room?!

Realizing the implications, I jumped out of bed and shook him awake with all the urgency of a disaster drill.

"Why am I here?!"

Lingering Effects

Dogeon, still groggy from sleep, stretched and began explaining the events of the previous day, his expression calm as if he'd been expecting this confrontation.

"…So, you remember drinking, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, after your third drink, you got tipsy, started rambling a lot, and then fell asleep."

I rambled and then passed out? That wasn't what worried me—I was more concerned about saying something embarrassing while drunk.

"…I didn't say anything weird, did I?"

"It's not weird to vent to a friend," Dogeon replied, as if it were no big deal.

That was true, but what if I'd let something sensitive slip?

"Like… about my family, maybe?"

"Oh, not really. Just that your father places a lot of expectations on you, and you're worried about meeting them."

If that's not a family drama, what is?!

"And after you passed out, I didn't know where else to take you, so I brought you here. That's all," Dogeon concluded.

"…You didn't do anything strange, right?"

More than my rambling, I was worried about whether he had done anything inappropriate. No matter how trustworthy he was, I knew how reckless men could get in certain situations.

"…Of course not."

Dogoeon paused briefly before denying it.

Should I believe him?

There weren't any signs of anything amiss with my body, so I had no grounds to press him further.

"Really?"

"Well… if I'm being honest… I did stroke your hair. Sorry for not mentioning it earlier."

I knew it!

Still, it was just my hair, which I supposed was within the realm of forgivable offenses.

My father used to stroke my hair or rub my back when I slept, so it didn't feel entirely inappropriate.

“…In the future, ask for permission first. And only when no one else is around.”

I didn’t mind Dogeon doing it. It might even be… comforting.

“Understood,” he said, smiling slightly despite his groggy state.

That smile nagged at me. I felt like I’d forgotten something important.

Something… academy-related?

Oh no.

“Dogeon.”

“What?”

He still looked as though he hadn’t pieced things together.

“I just remembered—we’re back to regular classes starting today.”

“…What? You must be mistaken. That’s tomorrow.”

“We were missing for an entire day, remember?”

“Oh.”

We both looked at the clock.

Only 20 minutes remained until class began.

“…See you in class!”

With that, I bolted out of his room and rushed to mine.

Thankfully, the hallway was empty, so no one saw me.

Still, with so little time left, taking a shower was impossible.

Even changing clothes took me five minutes, leaving barely enough time to prepare.

I needed to do something about my disheveled appearance.

Divine intervention it is.

Oh, great one, rid me of my impurities!

…Hah. You seem in quite a hurry. What is it?

I'm about to be late for class!

Calling on the divine for such a trivial reason felt shameful, but I didn't want to face the embarrassment of showing up unkempt.

Summoning me for such a petty reason… If it were anyone else, I'd have punished them. But very well.

Despite his words, I felt the divine energy envelop me.

My messy hair and lingering traces of alcohol vanished.

I quickly expressed my thanks and dashed toward the classroom.

Ten minutes left.

It would be close, but I could make it.

Running at full speed, I arrived with two minutes to spare.

"…Huff, huff…"

I paused outside to catch my breath, attempting to regain some semblance of composure.

I entered the classroom just as the morning announcements were about to begin.

Barely made it.

Dogeon was already in his seat, breathing heavily from his own rush.

Looking around, I noticed several empty desks.

Some of our classmates must’ve been injured.

As the announcements began, the teacher entered, accompanied by a girl I didn’t recognize.

“Good morning, everyone. Due to the high number of injured students in her class, Cecilia will be joining us temporarily. Please welcome her.”

A new student, then.

Cecilia, huh?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 71

Chapter 71: “Why hasn’t it started yet?”

“Hello, everyone. Since our class has too many injured students… I’ll be staying here until they recover. I’m Cecilia. Please take care of me.”

I had no way of knowing how the snowball effect had rolled into this outcome, but Cecilia—whom I was supposed to meet at the end of the first semester—had joined our class.

We had a brief conversation at the party, but we were hardly acquainted enough to call each other friends. At best, we knew each other’s names.

Dorothy-sensei glanced around before fixing her gaze on the empty seat beside Exipri.

Exipri, who seemed disheartened, stared blankly at her desk, doodling aimlessly in her notebook.

Though Exipri liked chatting with the girl seated next to her whenever possible, it wasn’t exactly unfortunate for me.

After all, it was still early in the story, and I already had connections with five heroines. Two were almost strangers, one inexplicably hated me, and the others…

I was on good terms with Anya, and I could build a strong connection with Cecilia from now on. As for Camilla, I’d need to meet her privately and clear up any misunderstandings.

“…Right. Cecilia? I think the seat next to Exipri would be a good fit for you. Is that okay?”

“Anywhere is fine with me.”

At the mention of someone sitting next to her, a flicker of energy returned to Exipri's eyes.

"Next to me?"

"Yes, Exi. Everyone, let's give our new friend a warm round of applause!"

The class clapped for Cecilia, not too enthusiastically but earnestly enough. Only Baek Hoyeon clapped half-heartedly, looking disinterested.

What's her problem this time?

"Everyone, I'll be in your care."

Just as depicted in the original story, Cecilia had a very polite and composed personality. At least, when it came to matters unrelated to spirits.

"Oh? Are you… Han Dogeon?"

"You remembered me. Yes. It's nice to see you, Cecilia."

Since she wasn't of noble status, I didn't see the need for formalities and had suggested using casual names when we first met. She agreed without hesitation—probably because she was half-elf.

Elves in this world were unusually friendly toward humans, with the exception of someone like Georg. Unless it posed a threat to them, they were willing to share just about everything.

And yes, they were born from the World Tree.

That's why they were a race incapable of producing half-blood offspring. In the original story, Cecilia claimed that the Goddess herself had intervened in her creation.

Which means… someone must have knocked on that tree, or… well, you get the idea.

"And you are…?"

After greeting Exipri and another student seated behind her, Cecilia turned to Baek Hoyeon, but for some reason, hesitated.

“I’m Baek Hoyeon. Nice to meet you.”

Baek Hoyeon’s tone was curt, making it unclear if she was being indifferent or just couldn’t be bothered. She said only what was necessary and then turned her gaze forward.

“…Ah, nice to meet you.”

Though Cecilia was polite to everyone else, she seemed awkward around Hoyeon.

Even without knowing her background, Hoyeon’s imposing presence was palpable. It was mutual, though—Hoyeon clearly didn’t welcome Cecilia either.

“Wow, are those ears… are you an elf?”

Exipri, curious, turned to Cecilia and asked.

Her combination of teal hair and red eyes, along with the cross-shaped mark in her pupils, was rare enough to draw attention.

All elves had crosses in their eyes, a hint of some connection to the Goddess—a thread that was never fully unraveled in the story.

“Yes, I’m an elf. Is this your first time meeting one, Exipri?”

“Not the first time seeing one, but I’ve never talked to one before! Can I touch your ears?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to be gentle, okay?”

Watching Exipri gently touch Cecilia’s ears with awe, while Cecilia smiled awkwardly and advised her to be gentle, reminded me of the original novel.

“…You’re staring quite intently.”

“Oh, Hoyeon.”

Hoyeon didn’t seem pleased with me.

“So, what about me? Do you find me fascinating too? Go ahead, say something.”

She was clearly jealous, unwilling to tolerate my interest in anyone else. She pulled my attention toward her immediately.

Rather than make excuses, I figured it was better to go along with her demands to keep things smooth.

Fascinating… Well, everything about her was intriguing, but it was her tail that piqued my curiosity the most.

“I’m curious about your tail. But… Why do you ask?”

I had a bad feeling and decided to probe her intentions. Before I could, she raised her tail and placed it in my palm.

“Here. Now you can touch it. But don’t brush it backward—absolutely not.”

Ah, I see. Watching Exipri touch Cecilia’s ears must have given her the idea that letting me touch her tail would ensure my focus stayed solely on her.

“But… there are a lot of people watching right now…”

“It’s an order. Stroke it.”

I tried to use the audience as an excuse, but Hoyeon was unrelenting.

Although it wasn’t visible under the desk, I couldn’t shake the awkwardness of the situation.

Lately, her obsession seemed to be growing stronger, which only added to my discomfort.

Still, she held the upper hand in this situation.

Her tail's fur was much stiffer than her hair. While it looked soft, it was surprisingly coarse.

"How is it? My tail?"

"It's… stiff."

But the texture was oddly addictive—like petting a cat with bristly fur.

"…Is that all?"

"Well, it's strangely addictive. Do you groom your tail daily? There's not a single tangle."

"Hmm. You have a good eye, it seems."

Unintentionally engaged in an impromptu critique of her tail, I realized that the atmosphere behind me had grown oddly quiet.

Had they already exhausted their chatter? That didn't seem like something Exipri would do.

Feeling suspicious, I glanced back to find Cecilia looking this way, her cheeks tinged with a faint blush.

"…Oh, it's not like I was staring because I wanted to… You two seem… quite close, don't you?"

It seemed yet another misunderstanding had been added to the pile.

***

"Are you curious why I'm here, everyone? Then think back to what happened a week ago. Yes, the demonic beasts attacked. It's regrettable that some of your comrades are no longer here, but…"

Blah, blah. I didn't expect to see Georg's face first thing in the morning. According to him, that incident had caused some changes to the schedule.

"Thus, today we will gauge your overall abilities through the most impartial method. Now, let's relocate to the gymnasium."

…Really? If this was the plan, why not just summon us to the gym in the first place?

Annoyed by the inefficient process, I felt irritation bubbling up, but knowing his eccentricity, I had no intention of voicing complaints.

Not that I'd have the courage to say anything, anyway.

Slowly, everyone rose from their seats and headed toward the gymnasium. Cecilia naturally moved closer to Dogeon, and Exipri followed suit.

It seemed Dogeon's harem protagonist status wasn't going anywhere, as women kept gravitating toward him, which only made me inexplicably envious.

Sure, I was a girl right now, so it shouldn't have mattered, but something about it still rubbed me the wrong way.

That, and the fact that I didn't like anyone clinging to Dogeon's side.

I was his closest friend, after all.

I wouldn't let lust triumph over friendship.

I approached Dogeon and grabbed his hand.

Cecilia's flustered gaze met mine, but I deliberately narrowed the distance, as if to flaunt my position.

"…Ugh."

That's right. Your place is a few steps away, while mine is right here, by his side.

“Let’s go.”

Dogeon made a disappointed face, but that wasn’t my problem. As long as I was watching, he’d better only look at me.

When we arrived at the gymnasium, something about the scene felt different. There were objects hanging in the corner—were those swords?

“Running away can only take you so far. Starting today, I will teach you all how to attack. To assess your current skills, we’ll begin with sparring matches.”

Ah, finally. The hallmark of any academy story: sparring.

“…What if someone doesn’t know how to fight?”

A timid-looking girl mustered her courage and asked Georg hesitantly.

“Good question. In that case, you may forfeit. Even if you lose, there will be no penalties. The purpose of determining victories and ranks is merely to tailor instruction to your level. I expect you to give your all.”

He added a cautionary note that injuries, even severed limbs, wouldn’t be permanent during the sparring matches but would persist until the session ended. Then he began calling names.

“Daniel, Finn. Step forward. If you don’t see a weapon you can use on the rack, let me know. I’ll craft one for you.”

Apparently, being able to forge weapons on the spot was a prerequisite for being an academy professor. Watching two unfamiliar boys walk out with serious expressions, I couldn’t help but feel like a spectator in a colosseum.

The only difference was that, eventually, every spectator here would have to become a gladiator themselves.

“What do you plan to fight with?”

Watching the boys clumsily swing their weapons at each other, I suddenly grew curious about what Dogeon would use.

“I’ll primarily rely on magic, but I can handle a sword to some extent.”

As expected of the protagonist—he could use both magic and swords. Meanwhile, I could barely wield a sword properly.

“Well… good luck.”

Unable to think of anything else to say, I simply wished him well and turned back to watch the boys’ sparring match.

The two clashed weapons, tripping and twisting to knock each other off balance. It was almost comical to watch.

I wondered how many of them could withstand my brother’s sword if he stepped in here.

That thought made me laugh involuntarily.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 72

Chapter 72: Sparring (1)

“…Pfft… hahaha…”

Sometimes, I couldn’t help but think that Baek Hoyeon’s laughter had an oddly chilling undertone.

It wasn’t directed at me, but whenever she laughed at someone else, there was always this unsettling sense of something lurking behind it.

I couldn’t pinpoint what it was, but it definitely felt dangerous.

“…Are you enjoying yourself?”

She had occasionally shown that same laugh during swordsmanship club sessions, making me wonder if she secretly enjoyed watching fights.

That said, she didn’t seem to enjoy being in fights herself.

“Enjoying it? Of course. There’s nothing more entertaining than watching a fight. So, tell me—who do you think will win? The blue-haired guy or the one with the white bandana?”

She asked me with genuine amusement, her tone casual, yet bearing the unmistakable poise of a princess.

Well, it wasn’t like the outcome of the match mattered much.

No penalties for losing, and the sparring was only to gauge everyone’s abilities.

There was no need to take it too seriously.

The two male students were evenly matched, neither willing to give an inch.

Though I wasn't a fan of predicting winners or losers, since Hoyeon suggested it, I decided it wouldn't hurt to make a guess.

"The blue-haired one, maybe. The white bandana is holding out well, but there's a noticeable size difference. Plus, since I don't sense any mana from him, it looks like he's relying solely on skill."

"Oh? Do you think so? I believe the white bandana will win. He seems to be hiding a trump card."

Even here, we had differing opinions. Their fight was so close that it was hard to predict the outcome.

They blocked each other's sword trajectories, anticipated strikes, and used their stances to disrupt attacks.

It was impossible to tell who would win.

"So… what shall we bet for?"

"…Bet?"

"Every wager needs a punishment, doesn't it? Go ahead, propose something. I'm confident I'll win."

She was unusually smug, confidently declaring that any punishment would be fine.

Her provocations were almost enough to ignite my competitive spirit.

"…How about… stripping?"

It was a classic punishment, so I suggested it matter-of-factly.

However, her reaction was far from ordinary.

“…That doesn’t add up! What benefit would I gain from seeing your naked body…?”

She hissed at me quietly, clearly annoyed.

Still, her irritation was oddly focused. It seemed I’d need to come up with another idea.

Buying something didn’t feel fair either, considering her overwhelming wealth.

…Ah, maybe this would work.

“Then how about deciding where to go this weekend? That way, it’s mutually beneficial.”

“That… sounds acceptable. Very well, let’s go with that.”

She agreed, likely because the proposal seemed reasonable.

Coincidentally, there was a place I’d been meaning to visit anyway.

It wasn’t an absolute must, but it was a beautiful building I’d like to see with Hoyeon.

“Yes, that’s fine. Oh, it looks like the match is about to end.”

The blue-haired student was overpowering the white bandana, nearly pressing him to the ground.

Realizing that technique wasn’t enough, the blue-haired student resorted to sheer brute strength, and the white bandana barely managed to hold his ground.

Just when it seemed like the blue-haired student would win, an unexpected twist occurred.

The white bandana sidestepped and tilted his blade, causing the blue-haired student to momentarily lose his balance.

Seizing the opportunity, the white bandana struck at the blue-haired student's neck—

Slashing it. But there was no spray of blood.

The blue-haired student clutched his neck, clearly struggling to process whether this was reality or a dream.

"Finn wins. An excellent match. Return to your seats."

"As expected."

Hoyeon closed her eyes and spoke with a strangely irritated expression.

It was honestly cute, but right now, I was more focused on winning my bet with her.

"…Beginner's luck, I suppose."

"Next, Baek Hoyeon and Remulia. Step forward."

***

I had vaguely assumed my name would be called eventually, but I didn't expect to be up second.

"Oh, Hoyeon, you're up second. Do you want to predict the outcome of this match too?"

Dogeon, oddly enthusiastic about the sparring, brought up bets before offering any encouragement.

"…Aren't you going to cheer for me?"

That stung. I'd been planning to cheer for him if his name was called.

“Oh, of course, I’m sure you’ll win, Hoyeon… but still. A match is a match, isn’t it?”

Realizing his mistake, Dogeon quickly cheered for me, but he ruined it by adding an unnecessary comment at the end.

“Hah. Forget it. Naturally, I bet on myself to win.”

“I’ll bet on you too, Hoyeon.”

Why did I even bring up betting? I just wanted to chat with Dogeon while watching the matches.

But seeing how seriously he was taking it, I started regretting my suggestion.

Feeling slightly annoyed, I descended into the arena.

No one had called it that, but with its colosseum-like design, it was hard to see it as anything else.

The weapon rack held many blades, but none matched what I used back home.

I didn’t love the idea of asking that psycho professor for help…

“Professor Georg.”

“What is it, Hoyeon? Do you need a weapon? I would think someone of your caliber wouldn’t require one.”

…Seriously? He’d been subtly underestimating me before, but now he was being openly dismissive.

At the time, I dismissed it as a peculiar charm, but now that I knew Georg was a complete lunatic, I felt an overwhelming urge to snap.

“A blade as long as my leg. Please craft one for me.”

I kept my tone curt, effectively telling him to shut up and just make the weapon.

Surprisingly, instead of crafting it on the spot, Georg reached into a subspace and pulled it out. Without a word, he walked to the corner of the arena.

“Take your positions.”

“…In the name of our great ancestor, Remus, I look forward to an honorable duel! My name is Remulia! Prepare yourself!”

My opponent was a talkative girl who seemed to chatter on endlessly. It must be a noble custom to follow such tedious rituals.

“I’m Baek Hoyeon.”

Naturally, I had no reason to bother with such formalities. I didn’t have any ancestors or titles worth naming anyway.

Remulia seemed taken aback—offended, even—by my brief response.

“…Ready, begin.”

At the signal, my opponent charged straight at me.

The way her body was imbued with mana suggested she practiced a mana breathing technique.

If I’d known this earlier, I might have bet differently…!

“…Hngh.”

Despite her build being similar to mine, she packed a surprising amount of strength.

Annoyed by my lack of pleasantries, she launched a relentless assault. But…

Compared to my father or my brother, her attacks were laughably weak.

“This ends now!”

Growing overconfident after I continued to defend without counterattacking, she attempted an overly ambitious and wide-open move.

I landed a clean strike to her solar plexus.

“Gah…?!”

Caught off guard, she collapsed forward with her sword still raised in the air.

I would have gone for her neck, but as expected of someone adept in mana breathing, she recovered from the shock quickly enough to block with her blade.

What a shame.

“…You don’t even know mana breathing… how did you…?!”

Her chatter persisted.

The momentum of her earlier onslaught was gone, and she hesitated to approach.

Well, if she won’t come to me, I’ll just go to her.

Though she seemed skilled at attacking, she was far less adept at defending.

Unlike her earlier aggression, she barely managed to block my strikes.

Her blocks were last-second reactions, leaving scratches accumulating all over her body.

She must’ve been used to dominating weaker opponents.

Her frantic attempts to escape only fueled my determination to keep her cornered.

Even if my skill was modest, it was still my father's swordsmanship.

There was no way I'd lose to someone like this.

"…Ah!"

I struck her sword aside and slashed cleanly across her exposed torso.

Even if I couldn't defeat the A-class in the swordsmanship club, opponents like this were no problem.

As before, there was no blood. The minor wounds on her body vanished as if they'd never existed.

Confirming that her torso was intact, Remulia clenched her fists in frustration, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I lost… I was so close…"

You thought you were close? Dream on.

"Baek Hoyeon wins. Impressive, Hoyeon. I didn't expect you to be skilled in swordsmanship. A great duel from both of you. Return to your seats."

Am I not allowed to use a sword?

I glared at Georg before carefully returning the weapon to its rack and heading back to my seat.

"As expected of you, Hoyeon. Your skills are fitting for the A-class!"

"How many times do I have to tell you? That was pathetic."

If it had been my father or my brother, they wouldn't have wasted time exchanging pleasantries—they'd have attacked immediately.

And even if they listened to greetings, they'd have sliced their opponent in half mid-sentence.

Compared to their swordsmanship, my strength and technique were embarrassingly inadequate.

But even something this lackluster could be useful in certain situations—like now.

"…That aside, it's 2-1 again. What should I do? Looks like I'll be deciding the destination."

"The outcome of a match isn't certain until the very end."

The overly straightforward remark left me with no rebuttal.

"Fine… do your best."

I hadn't decided on a destination yet, but I was thinking of revisiting that pet shop.

The bizarre creatures there had piqued my curiosity.

As another student stepped into the arena, we resumed our betting, guessing who would emerge victorious.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 73

Chapter 73: Sparring (2)

Swords clashed against each other.

The duelists shifted their stances, utilizing every ounce of their skills and strength to gain the upper hand.

A boy, barely of age, and a mother—two figures seemingly out of place in a battle—gazed at each other with lethal intent, aiming for the other's throat.

It was all for the sake of the gods.

In service to divine will, strangers pointed their blades at one another, intent on killing.

Exchanging countless strikes, they grew more fatigued with each passing moment.

Both instinctively sensed that the end of the match was near.

The battle, which had dragged on due to their evenly matched skills, concluded when the boy sliced through the woman.

Like a marionette whose strings had been cut, the woman collapsed to the ground, blood pooling around her.

"Haa… haa… Behold, O Great God! I have triumphed!"

The boy, gasping for breath, raised his voice to the heavens, celebrating his victory in the name of his deity. There was no grief or guilt for his fallen opponent.

After all, such feelings were unnecessary.

The blood spilled from the woman began to flow backward, as if time itself were rewinding.

Her torn flesh and muscles knit themselves back together, and her once-stilled heart began to beat again.

The boy, unfazed by this miraculous scene, knelt on the ground, bowing his head in silence.

The woman, having just returned from the brink of death, steadied herself and followed suit, bowing her head as if nothing had happened.

Moments passed in silence, their heads still bowed, until the sound of approaching footsteps reached their keen animal-like ears—far beyond what any human could hear.

“Raise your heads.”

At the command of the approaching woman, they immediately lifted their heads, gazing at her with reverence.

Moved to tears, they awaited her words.

“You have endured much, training tirelessly in a faraway place for the past week. As a reward for your efforts, you may now apply to join the guard.”

“Ah… Thank you! Thank you, Byeolbi!”

At Byeolbi’s gesture, a rift in space opened behind them.

“Now, return to your families, children. They must be waiting for you as well.”

“Thank you for choosing us…! Truly, thank you!”

As the figures disappeared, still bowing in gratitude, Byeolbi thought to herself.

The baseline of the species had risen.

Even after choosing two individuals ill-suited for combat, the results they had achieved in a mere week were impressive. Byeolbi was satisfied.

Enhancing the upper limits of the species had been achieved a millennium ago, but subtly raising the baseline without alerting her true self was no easy feat.

As she pondered these thoughts, she turned her attention to the continent crafted by her runaway pupil, observing it with a mix of curiosity and approval.

The diluted magic, once a divine power, had been refined to a level usable by humans and adapted into their civilization.

Even the fragments of omnipotent observation devices had been shielded by barriers, preventing her from peering directly into their inner workings.

They had created something truly fascinating, she thought.

She glanced skyward, toward her true self observing this star from the asteroid belt at the edge of the solar system.

Humanity, as it stood, could not respond to her true self.

The futures where they bridged the sea of stars to meet her true self were far outnumbered by those where their free will led them to self-destruction.

Whether over resources, ideological conflicts, or simply giving up on space travel to live in virtual paradises until they ran out of power and perished, the outcomes were bleak.

Byeolbi contemplated these possibilities, reading the thoughts of her daughter and observing the world through her offspring’s eyes.

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“I think the red-haired one will win.”

“Oh? Have your recent losses driven you mad? Anyone can see that the blue-haired one will emerge victorious.”

The blue-haired competitor clearly dominated in both skill and the mana surrounding him.

It was obvious the red-haired competitor was only still standing because the blue-haired one allowed it. But Dogeon seemed intent on rooting for the underdog.

“We’ll see. Carelessness might lead to a nasty surprise, don’t you think?”

“As you say, we shall see. Your strange predictions do hit the mark from time to time.”

Despite Dogeon’s contrarian bets occasionally paying off, the score between us remained close.

Moments ago, Dogeon had pulled ahead by two points, but my three consecutive correct predictions now put me in the lead by one.

“…Hyaah!”

“Gaaah!”

“…No way. Don’t tell me he got hit by such a sloppy strike?”

Even with his entire body wrapped in visible mana, how had that blow pierced through?

“I told you. Just wait and see. The red-haired one kept fluctuating his mana —it was obvious this would happen.”

Smug, Dogeon gloated. I gave him a light smack out of irritation, but it didn’t change the fact that my chosen competitor had lost.

Why couldn’t the blue-haired one just finish it quickly instead of toying with his opponent?

“Redmond wins. Bluetark, your arrogance was your undoing. You had dozens of chances to finish it.”

“I… got carried away…”

What an idiot. I watched Dogeon feign indifference, masking his smug satisfaction as best as he could.

“Next up: Cecilia and Han Dogeon. Step forward.”

Before I knew it, it was Dogeon’s turn.

Seeing him paired with the new girl, I couldn’t help but wonder if he had some magnetic charm as a harem protagonist, constantly drawing women toward him.

“…Naturally, I’ll bet on you.”

It could be called a loyalty bet, but I genuinely believed Dogeon would win.

Besides, if Dogeon lost, I could always accuse him of match-fixing to save face.

There was no reason not to bet on him.

“I think… Cecilia will win.”

What a clueless guy. In moments like this, he should confidently bet on himself, following my lead.

“Hmph. Go on, then.”

If I lost by a single point, I’d cry foul and claim match-fixing.

That’d leave him with no choice, even if he took matches seriously.

I settled into my seat, planning to watch Dogeon and see how he fought.

I didn’t know the first thing about magic. Sure, I could try to mimic it by asking the gods, but the one I relied on wasn’t in great shape, so I couldn’t summon their help recklessly.

Honestly, without Dogeon, I’d have no business being on this continent.

With such thoughts running through my mind, I turned to the arena.

The competitors had entered.

Dogeon held a single sword, while Cecilia had a multitude of floating objects hovering behind her.

Among them was one particularly large mass that exuded a powerful divine presence.

If that spirit had carved up a god to make such an object…

Could it be… a head?

The grotesque thought sent chills down my spine, and I shivered briefly.

As if it sensed my discomfort, the massive object locked its hollow, empty eyes—if they could be called eyes—onto me.

Though they were mere voids, I could feel it watching me.

“What’s wrong, Anima? Is something bothering you?”

Cecilia spoke to the mass, seemingly concerned.

…It could talk? Yet I couldn’t hear a word.

“I’m Han Dogeon. I’m sure you already know, but… let’s both do our best.”

“…Ah, I’m Cecilia. I apologize; something distracted me for a moment…”

“That’s understandable.”

Seeing Dogeon subtly charm her in my absence irritated me even more. Lose already, will you?

…No, wait. If he loses, I lose points. But rooting for him to win feels awkward too…

Ugh. This is complicated.

Regardless of my dilemma, the match began.

Dogeon charged at Cecilia immediately, but the ground rose to block his advance.

His mana-infused sword easily sliced through the earthen barrier, yet he had to retreat to avoid the incoming ice spears.

“Freeze…!”

As the spears rained down, Dogeon countered with fireballs, neutralizing them one by one.

But he was clearly outmatched in numbers—every time he nullified one, three more appeared.

Realizing he couldn’t keep up, Dogeon created a smokescreen with magic to obscure her vision.

“A shallow trick!”

Unfazed, Cecilia conjured wind to dispel the smoke, but there was no one there.

From the audience’s perspective, the scene was amusing.

In that brief moment, Dogeon had concentrated mana into his legs, leaped high into the air, and now prepared to strike.

Rather than splitting her in half with his sword as I half-expected, he landed lightly behind her and pressed his blade against her neck.

“It seems I’ve won.”

“…I surrender.”

Though her flashy use of magic had made the match exciting, the anticlimactic conclusion didn’t matter.

Dogeon had won, and that was all I cared about.

I gained a point, and it felt good.

“Han Dogeon wins. Predictable, but a sound strategy nonetheless, Dogeon. Cecilia, you also put up a commendable effort. Both of you, well done. Return to your seats.”

I couldn’t resist teasing Dogeon as he trudged back to his seat.

“This time, I was right. I knew you’d win.”

“I was lucky. If she’d been more cautious, I would’ve turned into a pincushion mid-air.”

“But you didn’t, did you?”

A win’s a win, after all.

What concerned me more was the eerie presence emanating from her spirit.

It was unmistakably divine power.

Divine power was supposed to repel my god, yet somehow, even as hostile forces, the two had been forcibly combined.

The mysteries of this continent only deepened.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 74

Chapter 74: Sparring Match (3)

Even though I wasn't a man anymore, I had no intention of taking back the words I'd already spoken.

Especially since it was a bet I started. It would've been utterly humiliating if the one who suggested it backed out.

Still… I couldn't help but feel displeased.

"Chloe wins. Her judgment to replicate the sword on the spot and escape the predicament was impressive."

The current score was 7 to 6. I had 6 points. Matches forfeited without fighting didn't count, so only one match remained.

It was hard not to show my growing gloom. But since the remaining contenders were Exipri and a female student I didn't recognize, it was too early to give up.

It was truly a toss-up. At worst, I planned to force a tie and declare the bet void.

…Unless Dogeon placed his bet on the same person as me, in which case it would be a bust. But surely, as a man, he wouldn't resort to such a petty trick.

Would he…?

"I guess my choice was right this time," he said smugly.

"…I see."

Despite my confident tone, I was increasingly convinced Dogeon would resort to that method.

Just looking into his eyes, I could tell he was taking this bet far too seriously.

“That puts me one point ahead,” he remarked.

“I know, I know. Spare me the commentary and stay quiet.”

“Have you thought about where you’d like to go if you lose?”

He teased me, asking where I’d go if he won. Truthfully, I only picked the pet store because it seemed like a tolerable choice—I didn’t have anywhere specific in mind.

But losing to Dogeon and following him there felt different than just going along with him voluntarily.

“I haven’t, you fool. Enough with the teasing. I suggested this for some lighthearted fun, but you’re taking it too seriously.”

I spoke with a hint of resentment. He must’ve felt a little guilty because he shrank slightly before responding with mock confidence.

“Then you shouldn’t have suggested the bet so recklessly.”

“You insufferable brat… Fine. I swear I’ll never bet with you again.”

A simple apology would have sufficed, but his persistent backtalk was infuriating.

He seemed to realize his mistake and hurriedly apologized, but I had no intention of accepting it.

“…”

I stayed silent, clearly signaling for him not to talk to me. Thankfully, he got the message and quieted down quickly.

About time.

“Lastly, Exipri and Cora, step forward.”

In the tense atmosphere, the final betting round began. Exipri, cursed with a weak body despite mastering mana breathing techniques, faced Cora, whose physicality alone rivaled Anya’s. Naturally, I bet on Cora.

Exipri appeared to be under 150 cm tall, while Cora, though seemingly unable to use magic or mana breathing, had an edge with her physique.

It might’ve been because Exipri was involved that I hesitated.

“I’ll bet on that student, Cora.”

“…I’ll go with Exipri.”

Perhaps feeling guilty, Dogeon bet on Exipri, seemingly planning to throw the match.

That softened my stance a little.

People make mistakes; the important part is learning from them.

“…Begin.”

The match started, but the scene was almost painful to watch.

Every time Cora chased, Exipri fled.

It was hard to even call it a fight.

Despite dragging a hammer nearly her size, Exipri managed to evade impressively.

It was a testament to her mana breathing skills.

The problem was that she used it all for fleeing and dodging.

“Ahhh! Stop chasing meee!”

“You little thing… How are you this fast?”

She continued to dodge Cora’s twin blades by a hair’s breadth.

For a moment, I feared Cora might actually lose.

If Exipri decided to swing that hammer in earnest, Cora, wide open and defenseless, would go down in one hit.

…No way. That couldn’t happen.

Yet a nagging unease lingered. What if Cora really lost?

And then Exipri’s shout made that unease grow.

“Stop chasing me…! I’ll swing it if you don’t!”

“Fine! Swing it! Quit running already!”

When someone says they’ll actually do it, most people wouldn’t. But with someone like Exipri, you had to take her words at face value.

I hoped I was wrong this time, but my bad feeling was spot-on.

Time seemed to slow as I focused intently, watching her hammer swing down.

Cora noticed it only at the very last moment and squeezed her eyes shut.

With a loud smack, audible even from a distance, Georg declared, “Exipri wins. You should’ve swung sooner instead of dragging it out. Cora, I hope you’ve learned not to neglect defense in favor of offense.”

…She actually lost.

“8 to… 6 now,” Dogeon said, still keeping score.

“Who doesn’t know that already?”

I sighed openly, not bothering to suppress it.

His expression showed no surprise at his win.

He’d planned to win all along, hadn’t he?

…Crafty guy.

“So… I guess I won?”

“Yeah, you won, you stubborn jerk. So, where do you want to go?”

I snapped, signaling him to cut the nonsense and just say it. I was resigned to my fate.

I’d have to be more cautious next time.

“The… church.”

Of course, he had a reason for being so determined to win. He must’ve known I’d never agree to go there otherwise.

My thoughts on this continent’s faith could be summed up in one word: abysmal.

They were no better than cults spouting bizarre doctrines.

Absolute trash.

“You said the church.”

Despite my deep dislike, I had no choice but to accept the result.

Perhaps sticking close to Dogeon would make it slightly more bearable.

…Even though I still hated the idea.

“Yes. I know you don’t like it, Hoyeon, but… I have a pressing reason to visit.”

“Does it absolutely have to be me going with you?”

Honestly, I wanted to opt out. Being cooped up in my room sounded far more appealing.

Even with my green orb companion, being near the church felt suffocating, like passing by a sewer.

“I think it’d be better if you came with me.”

…What could I do? A friend asked me to come, so I had to. That’s what friends are for—mutual give and take.

Back when I had that other friend, we also had a lot of give-and-take.

“If you’re going to insist like that, I suppose I have no choice. Fine… I’ll go with you. Happy now?”

“…Thank you!”

Dogeon grinned openly and expressed his gratitude.

Seeing him this happy, it was hard to stay entirely annoyed.

I just had to think of it as enduring a single day of discomfort.

The air near the church was abysmal, and I disliked the people inside, but at least the building itself was tolerable.

Not that I planned to pray or do anything of the sort once inside.

“Now, I’ll announce the results,” Georg declared.

While Dogeon and I were talking, Georg began announcing the rankings.

Cecilia, myself, Dogeon, and a few others were placed in the advanced class.

Exipri, Redmond, Daniel, and others were assigned to the intermediate class.

The rest, including those who forfeited, went into the lower class.

With Georg's indifferent remark that the session was over, the students poured out of the gymnasium in a loud rush.

Through the crowd, Cecilia and Exipri approached us.

"That was a brilliant ambush, Dogeon. You completely caught me off guard…"

"It was pure luck. I was nervous about getting caught, but I got lucky this time."

And just like that, they started chatting the moment they met.

Did they not notice I was standing right there?

"Exipri, your attack was excellent too. Maybe you could try being a little braver? You're stronger than you think."

"But it's so scary…"

…Maybe Dogeon just talks to everyone this way.

I say "everyone" because he stubbornly avoids me.

"Hoyeon… Miss. Um… You defeated Remus without mana breathing. That's… really impressive."

Even now, look at him. He clearly didn't want to talk to me but forced himself out of politeness.

It felt like going on a blind date and seeing the other person's face harden at first glance, only for them to force a fake smile and make polite small talk.

"I won because I'm better. It's the natural result."

"…I see."

Something about this still didn't sit right with me.

Whether it was spirits or elves, I just didn't like them.

Even during the next class, the thought lingered, making it impossible to concentrate.

Not that it mattered—I already knew the material.

I spent the time killing boredom until the bell rang.

As soon as it did, I grabbed Dogeon and dragged him to the cafeteria.

In a relatively quiet spot, I decided to ask him something.

"What do you think of that girl, Cecilia?"

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“What do you think of that girl, Cecilia?”

I didn’t need to guess why Hoyeon was asking this question—her sour expression made it obvious.

Though she tried to maintain a calm, collected demeanor, Hoyeon wasn’t good at hiding her emotions.

She excelled at masking her words and true nature, but when it came to her feelings, she didn’t seem to put much effort into concealing them.

“Cecilia? I think she’s nice. She’s approachable, speaks gently, and, well, being an elf around here makes her stand out. She seems like a good person.”

“I see. So that’s how it is…”

Even now, I could practically see her jealousy meter rising.

“…So, you’ve been looking at Cecilia all this time. I get it.”

Hoyeon didn’t like the attention I gave to Cecilia.

The same thing happened at the party and when I talked to Exipri.

Her jealousy wasn’t something you’d feel toward just a friend.

She might insist we were friends, but her feelings told a different story.

“Still, she could never be a friend like you.”

“…What’s that supposed to mean?”

She looked genuinely confused.

“Her personality is a bit too mild, and she’s so agreeable that, honestly, she’s kind of boring. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not friends with you just for entertainment. Cecilia might be a nice person, but I don’t think she’d make a good friend.”

Even in the original story, she wasn’t particularly popular. Outside of the elf fans, her following wasn’t very strong.

“…Really?”

My words seemed to lift the faint, dark aura surrounding her for a moment, but it was short-lived. She still didn’t seem entirely pleased.

“Hmph… Do you think I’ll let it go just because of that?”

Though she was trying to act mad, it was clear her anger had mostly subsided. Even so, I needed to properly apologize.

“Sorry. I won’t get distracted again.”

I wasn’t entirely sure if this warranted an apology, but if it would appease her, I didn’t mind.

“…You promise?”

“Of course. How could I look elsewhere when the most beautiful person is right here beside me?”

That was no empty compliment—it was my honest opinion.

Purely based on looks, none of the other heroines could surpass Hoyeon. They might captivate people with unique traits or attributes, but in sheer beauty, she stood at the top.

“…Eh?”

The unexpected praise made her face flush. The dark aura that had shrouded her disappeared, leaving behind a bashful Hoyeon.

“Uh… That’s… I mean… Ugh. Anyway, just follow me already!”

It was amusing how easily she melted under a compliment, but it made me wonder—could I really maintain a relationship with her and form bonds with other heroines?

Hoyeon surely had her limits. If I ever crossed that line, it wouldn’t just end badly—it would end catastrophically.

Yet leaving her wasn’t an option either; the potential risks were too great.

It was a dilemma I couldn’t solve yet.

For now, I’d just have to focus on building a strong bond with Hoyeon while keeping my options open.

Resolving myself, I followed her lead.

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At the Cafeteria

“Oh my, Hoyeon, and Dogeon too. Fancy meeting you here.”

I wasn’t sure what Dogeon had said to make me feel this way, but for some reason, it didn’t bother me as much.

“Ah, Cecilia. Are you alone? Where did Exipri go?”

Even though Dogeon was chatting amiably with Cecilia, I didn’t find it particularly unpleasant.

After all, Dogeon was just being polite and curious—it didn’t seem like he was seriously interested.

“Oh, she said she had a prior engagement, so I’m on my own. If it’s not too much trouble, may I join you?”

It was probably Camilla’s group she went to meet. I’d resolved my issues with them through a formal apology, but I still didn’t want to see them.

As for Cecilia joining us… That was something I’d need to consider.

“I don’t mind, but what about you, Hoyeon?”

Dogeon readily agreed, but I wasn’t so sure. Talking casually was one thing—eating together was another.

…Still, was it really a big deal? I knew better than anyone how lonely eating alone could be. If I could help, I wanted to.

Besides, I trusted Dogeon wouldn’t get swayed by Cecilia—he’d already told me I was the most beautiful.

Not that I cared about such things. Really.

“One more person shouldn’t be a problem. You may join us.”

“Thank you for your kindness! I was dreading eating alone. This is such a relief.”

She made it sound like eating alone was a terrible thing. What was wrong with it?

Sure, the food might taste worse, but sometimes you just want to eat alone. Though her words annoyed me slightly, I decided to let it slide.

We chose a suitable table and sat down.

While eating, I glanced at Cecilia’s plate. Something felt off.

Her plate was piled high with meat.

Wasn’t she an elf? Weren’t elves supposed to be vegetarians or something?

It might've been a stereotype, but in this world, those stereotypes often held true.

Should I ask…?

"Cecilia, I have a question."

"Ah… Yes, Hoyeon? What is it…?"

I could still sense a slight wariness from Cecilia, but it wasn't as blatant as before.

It felt more like a hint of nervousness.

"Elves… hmm. Aren't they all vegetarians? I'm asking because I don't know much about this, coming from another continent."

This wasn't some speciesist remark—I was genuinely curious.

"Ah… I see. Another continent… Yes, I can understand why you'd think that. Some books do depict our race as vegetarians, but I'd like to firmly state that's completely untrue."

She suddenly seemed unusually resolute.

"You're aware that our race originates from the Mother World Tree, aren't you?"

"That much I've read in books."

"Yes, then you might understand why we're somewhat reluctant to eat plants. It's not that we can't eat them, but… it's akin to humans eating monkeys or chimpanzees. Does that make sense?"

That… did make sense. And it was certainly unsettling.

"I understand now."

“But we do enjoy the fruit of World Trees that lack the Goddess’s blessing. We can’t eat them, but spirits find them incredibly beneficial. Most World Trees are blessed, though, so it’s rare to come across unblessed ones.”

I didn’t see why she needed to add that last part, but maybe she was just talkative.

Satisfied with this answer, I moved on to another question I’d been wondering about.

“And… hmm.”

I hesitated slightly, pondering what to call Dogeon in public.

While “Dogeon” was fine for others, it felt awkward for me. Referring to him as “you” didn’t sit well either.

Ah, I had an idea.

“Friend. You meant what you said earlier, right?”

“Are you referring to… that statement?”

It felt a little strange, but it worked well enough.

“Of course, I meant it. How could I say something like that carelessly? I’d surely be punished by the heavens if I did.”

“The Goddess doesn’t hand out punishments for lies, you know. By the way… could you remind me what this is about?”

Oh, now I was certain—this girl was utterly oblivious.

“Ah, it’s nothing important, Cecilia.”

Nothing important? The statement that I was the most beautiful wasn’t important? I wasn’t about to let that slide.

“What exactly isn’t important? That I’m the most beautiful? Or—”

“Oh, yes! That! I definitely did say that you’re beautiful, Hoyeon.”

It was a relief he admitted it quickly.

If he’d tried to dodge the topic, I might’ve been tempted to bring up how he also called Cecilia boring.

I disliked having someone like Cecilia around Dogeon, but I didn’t want him to be completely isolated.

I just wanted him to focus solely on me when I was around.

“I… see.”

The atmosphere grew awkward because of me, but I didn’t feel guilty.

Strictly speaking, this whole situation was Dogeon’s fault, not mine.

So, I had no reason to feel bad.

He should’ve been paying attention to me in the first place.

“Ahem. Since we’ve finished eating… perhaps it’s time for us to part ways, Cecilia.”

“Ah… yes. It was a lovely time, Dogeon.”

“Take care.”

As soon as Cecilia left, Dogeon looked at me with a slightly reproachful expression.

“Hoyeon…”

“This time, it’s your fault. How could you say something like that wasn’t important?”

“…Yeah. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Since he apologized, I decided to let it go.

But it would be wise to remember his mistakes moving forward.

That way, I could correct him the next time he slipped up.

Not because I planned to hold it over his head and manipulate him.

Definitely not.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 76

Chapter 76: Church of the False God

When Cecilia left her hometown, the elder and her parents had given her one final piece of advice.

Humans are fragile beings, they said, and as one blessed by the goddess, especially someone as extraordinary as her, it was her duty to assist them.

Cecilia hadn't fully understood the meaning of those words until she left the forest. But once she stepped out and lived among them for just a short time, it became clear.

Among humans, only a rare few could see and wield mana, and those who could sense divine power were even fewer—far less than those who could perceive mana.

In contrast, elves were born with the ability to sense mana and divine power, and some could even faintly feel the presence of the goddess. Humans, by comparison, were overwhelmingly weak.

To her, humans seemed like fragile beings that might shatter if touched or blow away with the wind. She felt compelled to treat them with utmost care and reverence.

Even after arriving at the academy—where only the strongest among humans gathered—her perspective didn't change much.

Sure, there were a handful of humans who were more powerful, perhaps even rivaling the elders of her homeland. Yet most still felt as delicate as glass sculptures to her.

But Han Dogeon was different. Although he hadn't used his full strength, he had managed to defeat her once. And there was something about him—

something she couldn’t quite grasp.

It wasn’t mana or divine power. Something entirely different slumbered deep within him.

The goddess had tasked Cecilia with finding humans possessing extraordinary power, and this mission alone was enough to spark her interest in Dogeon.

Even if the “special power” the goddess spoke of was completely unrelated to the force sleeping inside Dogeon, Cecilia—unaware of the truth—approached him.

Or at least, she tried to.

Her attempts to get closer were frequently thwarted by one particular individual.

“Baek Hoyeon.”

The moment Cecilia saw her, she was reminded of a certain rumor.

It spoke of a group of beastfolk who had illegally crossed the continent from the east to enroll at the academy.

Realizing that Baek Hoyeon was the central figure of those rumors made Cecilia wary of her.

The goddess had warned that things coming from the east often bore ill intentions or brought fear, which only reinforced Cecilia’s hesitation.

And when she first saw Hoyeon, her brusque demeanor only confirmed her suspicions.

Cecilia had caught her harassing the male student seated beside her.

Although the boy seemed accustomed to it, Cecilia thought he looked resigned to his fate.

“But is that all…?”

Even the swordsmanship Hoyeon displayed felt unsettling.

It seemed designed solely for killing, lacking any higher purpose, pride, or ideology.

Then there was the incident in the cafeteria.

When Cecilia saw how Hoyeon subtly but unmistakably claimed Dogeon as her own, blocking any attempts Cecilia made to approach him, she became certain.

She had to save him.

She wasn’t sure if she could, and Hoyeon scared her—but Cecilia firmly believed she was the only one who could help him.

Still, she had no idea how.

She didn’t know how to rescue Dogeon from Hoyeon or how to give him the courage he needed.

Sigh. “What on earth should I do…?”

If it were a problem she could solve with force, she would have. But in the academy, there was no such opportunity.

Even her skill in spirit magic was of little use here.

While the academy did have a culture of dueling, it was mostly ceremonial and rarely practiced anymore.

She couldn’t exactly challenge Hoyeon to a duel to tell her to stop harassing Dogeon.

By the weekend, with no progress made, Cecilia decided to seek answers from the church.

Though the prophecies she received from the goddess were often vague, they usually provided enough guidance to point her in the right direction.

She arrived at the church in high spirits, only to be met with unexpected faces.

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By the weekend, I kept my word and followed Dogeon to the church.

I wasn't thrilled about it, but what choice did I have? I lost, after all.

"Ugh… I'm already out of breath…"

The exaggerated sigh from the person next to me wasn't directed at me, but I could tell they felt a little guilty for dragging me along.

"Ahaha… Sorry. But it's really important. Just this once, okay?"

What could possibly be so important that they felt the need to drag me to a church? I was genuinely curious.

"…Why do you need to go to church?"

Might as well hear the reason.

Surely it wasn't to flirt with someone.

No way he'd drag me along for that.

Yeah, no way.

"It's nothing like that. I just need to deliver this.

Do you remember what it is?"

Dogeon pulled out a piece of paper.

“…That thing from the abandoned warehouse.”

How could I forget? Things had gotten… awkwardly close back then.

If I’d been a guy or Dogeon a girl, it would’ve been burned into my memory regardless.

“Right. I’m going to reveal what Stefania’s been scheming to the church. It’s just a hunch, but I think she’s the one who unleashed the monster during the midterms.”

She did seem suspicious, but… was she really capable of something so sinister? She hadn’t done anything shady during the party.

Then again, I had seen piles of plans and documents stacked in her study. Still, it could just be the ramblings of an overactive imagination.

Not that I’d know anything about that.

“Do you have any evidence?”

“No, just a gut feeling. If she’s capable of creating demonized humans, releasing a monster wouldn’t be much of a stretch, don’t you think?”

Fair enough. Regardless of the truth, it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious around her. A sharp-eyed villainess with an ample chest practically screamed danger.

Having heard a reasonable explanation, I had no real grounds to argue further.

I squeezed the green orb in my pocket, feeling slightly calmer—but it was only a feeling.

Ugh. Still, I had to admit the building was beautiful.

With its brick walls and intricate stained glass, the church’s simple yet ornate design immediately caught the eye.

Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from grimacing as we stepped inside.

The air reeked of stale incense, and the oppressive presence of divine power was suffocating.

Inside, instead of the solemn atmosphere I expected, people were gathered in groups, chatting animatedly like it was a debate hall.

“If you compare the scriptures with the goddess’s life…”

“That perspective is intriguing, but isn’t it an overinterpretation…?”

“Still, there are verses that support it, so it’s hard to dismiss entirely…”

This wasn’t how I imagined people of faith to act. Exploring the nature of a god through academic debate?

Was that even allowed?

I was about to voice my disbelief when someone called out Dogeon’s name.

“…Huh? Dogeon…? What brings you here…?”

It was Cecilia. Just as I was about to growl at the disrespectful crowd inside, hearing her call Dogeon’s name snapped me back to my senses.

…Not that I liked her, but I didn’t want to start a war here.

There was a kind of energy among these people that I couldn’t find back home.

“And what brings you here, Cecilia?”

“Oh… I came to seek answers from the goddess…”

Yes, that’s the right attitude—lowering oneself and seeking answers.

I liked that approach a lot.

How could anyone think of questioning or probing a god? And priests of all people—how could they dare?

“I’m just here to deliver a document to the church. A bedridden friend asked me to bring it.”

“Oh no, how terrible. I hope your friend recovers soon.”

Dogeon’s ability to lie so smoothly without skipping a beat was honestly a little scary.

He didn’t have a bedridden friend, and no one gave him that document—he had stolen it.

Social butterflies who lied as easily as they breathed were terrifying.

“Um… perhaps we could… pray together…”

“No, thanks. You two go enjoy yourselves.”

Pray to this false god? Not in a million years.

“Oh, I’m not particularly religious. And I’m in a bit of a rush, so I’ll pray another time.”

“I see…”

Cecilia let us go with a disappointed expression.

Dogeon might have razor-sharp social awareness, but this elf? When would she develop some?

I mean, I’m right here.

“…Your lies are starting to creep me out.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Seriously. Thinking about how he might've lied to me a few times with that same skill made my skin crawl.

He wouldn't lie to a friend… would he?

Dogeon moved briskly through the church, navigating its halls until he stopped in front of a door.

Behind it, I could feel an overwhelming concentration of divine power.

It was so intense I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Who's there? We weren't expecting visitors at this hour."

When Dogeon knocked, the door opened to reveal a woman with golden hair and emerald-like eyes.

She greeted us with a slightly haughty demeanor.

"Good to see you, Gloria."

"…? Do you know me? If so, could you remind me when we've met? I don't recall meeting you before…"

Dogeon's sudden familiarity with her left her visibly flustered as she questioned whether they'd met before.

"…No, we haven't met. But perhaps this name will ring a bell—Ena."

The moment he called her Ena, the atmosphere changed.

Suspicion turned into hostility as her gaze sharpened and bore down on him.

"How do you know that name?"

The divine energy swirling around her intensified, circling Dogeon like a blade ready to strike.

The message was clear: any misstep would mean annihilation.

…What the hell is happening here?!

Should I call for the goddess or something?

“What matters isn’t how I know it, but what I intend to do with that knowledge. For now, could you read this?”

Unfazed by the looming threat, Dogeon calmly handed her the document.

Though wary, Gloria snatched the paper from him, her expression hardening as she read its contents.

“As you can see, this is just one of the many vile schemes Stefania has been plotting.”

“And who exactly are you? No, more importantly—where did you get this?”

“To answer your questions step by step: I’m simply someone who wishes to root out evil. As for this document, I lack the strength to confront her myself. But you… you might be able to handle it.”

Even in such a tense situation, Dogeon maintained his composure, steering the conversation smoothly.

Though Gloria’s divine energy still hovered menacingly, her stance shifted slightly—enough to indicate she was willing to listen.

“Well then, where shall we begin?”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 77

Chapter 77: The Collaborator

I couldn't see it, but I could feel something sharp in the air around me—likely blades of divine power, I thought.

In the original storyline, I eventually gained the title of Hero, which allowed me to see and wield divine power. But as things stood now, I was just a regular academy student, not even a candidate for Hero.

It was probably thanks to the quasi-magic I'd absorbed that I could sense anything at all. Hoyeon, meanwhile, was shifting nervously, her gaze fixed behind Gloria.

"Before we continue, if I may."

I didn't want to act without permission and risk being struck down by some divine misunderstanding, so I sought Gloria's approval first.

After she nodded, I scattered mana throughout the room, probing for anything unusual.

Not surprisingly, there were no signs of surveillance magic. Even Stefania wouldn't dare install eavesdropping spells inside the church.

"…All clear. Now, do you happen to know about a hidden storage room unused by the academy?"

"No, I've never heard of such a place. None of our informants have mentioned it either."

Of course they wouldn't. It's not exactly accessible by conventional means.

The path required stepping on flowers and jumping at precise intervals to bypass the magical barrier surrounding it.

I still remember Hoyeon's bewildered expression when I guided her there.

"That makes sense. The area is sealed with a barrier she personally set up. And it was built using her own funds after the academy's construction. It's natural you wouldn't know about it."

"…Then where did you learn about such a place?"

I raised a finger to my lips in a silent gesture.

"That's the one thing I can't share. It's my only bargaining chip."

"Very well. I won't press you further. Please, continue."

As expected of the Church's First Apostle, Gloria was astute.

She knew better than to kill the goose that lays golden eggs.

"Thank you. Within that storage room lie hundreds of schemes like this one. Perhaps even more dangerous ones. The reason I'm here today is to share its location with you."

"…And you're telling me this purely out of goodwill?"

Not at all.

My original plan had been to deliver this document just before the finals, simultaneously framing Stefania and currying Gloria's favor.

But after what happened during midterms, I reconsidered. What if Gloria didn't act according to the original storyline?

A chilling thought struck me—what if she used the plans I handed her in an entirely unpredictable way?

I wouldn't be able to control the fallout. So instead, I chose to reveal everything now.

Even if I couldn't directly thwart Stefania's schemes, I could weaponize the Church to inflict significant damage on her. At the very least, she'd be too busy licking her wounds to plot anything new for a while.

It was the best strategy I could come up with—and a chance to earn Gloria's favor.

The divine blades pointed at me vanished, a sign that Gloria had decided to trust me for now. Though she still wore a skeptical expression, she seemed willing to listen.

"Of course. I hold a grudge against her."

That was a lie, of course. But adding a touch of personal vendetta made my story more convincing.

Who would hand over potentially ruinous information about someone without a grudge?

"I see. I won't ask for details. Thank you for providing such valuable information during these troubling times."

Half a success. But then, an unexpected obstacle emerged—my atrocious drawing skills.

"…Hmm. I'm sorry, but could you redraw this? It's slightly better than before, but… still hard to decipher. Perhaps you'd be better off describing it in writing?"

"Ugh. Just a moment…"

I'd chosen to draw because I wasn't great with words, but now it was coming back to bite me.

My pitiful attempts at sketching were a waste of paper and graphite.

"Why not use magic to draw it, you fool?"

Ah. I felt ridiculous clutching my pencil after Hoyeon pointed that out.

How did I not think of that earlier?

Using mana, I etched the map directly onto the paper and handed it to Gloria.

Along with the location of the hidden base filled with Stefania's sinister plans.

This should be enough to keep Stefania occupied for a while.

She didn't seem to know we'd already been there, after all.

"…Remarkable. Even Decatria couldn't find this place. A paranoid mastermind would be less thorough than this. Thank you again."

"No, I should be thanking you. I knew about it but lacked the means to act. Fortunately, you have the power to do so."

"…Are we done here? Let's go."

I had been wondering when Hoyeon would finally suggest leaving.

She'd been remarkably patient.

If she'd interrupted earlier, things could've gotten messy.

"Wait a moment. Are you Baek Hoyeon?"

As we turned to leave, Gloria called out to Hoyeon, making her pause.

A bad feeling crept over me.

"Yes, that's me. Why do you ask?"

Hoyeon's tone grew sharper, a reaction to the Church's involvement.

"…No reason. And you must be Han Dogeon, the so-called 'mysterious collaborator.'"

Ah, so she figured it out. I knew rumors had been circulating, but I had hoped Gloria, with her disdain for worldly matters, wouldn't be aware.

Apparently, that wasn't the case. Either the rumors had spread widely, or they were significant enough for even her to hear.

"Yes. I wasn't trying to hide it, but I'd have preferred it stayed under wraps. Did you hear about it through rumors?"

Having my name known wouldn't do me any favors. If Stefania caught wind of this, it'd be over.

"Exactly as you think. The rumor was that a princess from the East keeps a poor boy named Han Dogeon as her pet. But it seems the truth is somewhat different."

"A pet?!"

Hoyeon bristled, clearly indignant at the implication. It wasn't entirely wrong—she did follow me around—but rumors have a way of twisting the truth.

Still, a pet? That was going a bit far, even for gossip.

"No offense intended. I was merely curious about the benefactor's identity. Farewell."

"Hmph. Let's go."

Muttering complaints about the absurd rumor, Hoyeon stormed off. As we left, I turned back to Gloria for a parting word.

"Today, we never met."

"Of course. 'Collaborator.'"

"Ugh, you talk too much!"

Hoyeon grabbed my collar and dragged me out, making it abundantly clear why the pet rumor might have started in the first place.

Meanwhile, Gloria was deep in thought.

A princess who wielded quasi-magic, a power rumored to originate from the eastern continent of evil, as mentioned in the goddess's scriptures.

And the boy at her side, a mysterious student suspected of Eastern origins, who had handed over critical information about Stefania.

Though Decatria had been keeping an eye on them, no significant results had emerged.

Gloria had deprioritized them in favor of dealing with Stefania, the Church's most pressing obstacle.

But today's events changed everything.

Hoyeon and Dogeon had risen to the same level of importance as Stefania.

Gloria retrieved a pendant and made a call.

-"Decatria? This is Ena. I need you to investigate Baek Hoyeon and Han Dogeon. Parents, origins—anything you can find."

-"Understood."

Gloria trusted Decatria's ambition to ensure compliance. With a faint smile, she turned to her battle gear and sword resting in the corner.

The time had come to end that venomous serpent, Stefania, once and for all.

Following Dogeon's instructions, Gloria reached the hidden base.

After crushing the layered protective spells with her divine-infused blade, a piercing alarm filled the air.

Unfazed, she began a prayer, waiting for her prey to arrive.

It didn’t take long.

The space tore open, and a figure emerged.

“So, it’s you, the one who came here before… Wait. You’re—!”

With no hesitation, Gloria swung her sword.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 78

Chater 78: The Cat and the Box

“…Do you realize how dangerous that was?”

As we wandered aimlessly after leaving the church, I couldn’t hold back my complaints to Dogeon.

I didn’t even bother bringing up his attitude toward the gods or divine power—there was no point since he clearly didn’t understand those things. But there was still plenty to say, especially about the danger he’d put himself in.

Gloria had let it slide this time, but if her paranoia had gotten the better of her, or if she’d started to suspect something was off, Dogeon could’ve easily ended up with more holes in him than a sieve.

To me, Gloria seemed like the type who wouldn’t hesitate to act.

The aura of someone who had killed before was unmistakable—it was a reasonable suspicion.

“I wasn’t being reckless. I had my reasons. The information I had about Stefania was something she couldn’t refuse.”

“…Still. What if?”

What if you got hurt?

I wanted to say it, but I knew it wouldn't matter. Telling him it was dangerous wouldn't stop him—if anything, it would only make him more eager.

That's just how guys are.

…Unless, of course, I locked him away somewhere completely safe and isolated from the outside world. Not that I'm saying I'd imprison Dogeon.

…Probably not. Even I couldn't be sure. If it was the only way to keep him safe…?

Hmm. Tough call.

"Hey, don't worry. At least the two of us have enough skill to buy time to escape if things go south."

He sounded confident, though I wasn't so sure. I didn't know the extent of Dogeon's magic, but it certainly didn't seem strong enough to match those divine blades.

I couldn't shake the feeling that something might go horribly wrong someday.

"…Ugh, fine. Let's drop it. But hey, didn't you say you had a cat? I didn't see it anywhere… Don't tell me you abandoned it already?"

Even the day after the party, the pet supplies in Dogeon's room looked untouched.

If he planned to get rid of it that quickly, why had he gone all-in on preparing to keep it in the first place?

"Oh… about that…"

Dogeon hesitated, looking like he knew he'd done something wrong.

At least he had the decency to feel guilty about it.

But on the flip side, it made him worse—knowing it was wrong yet still abandoning the cat? That was just vile.

I don't like cats, but irresponsible people are even worse.

Dogeon had always seemed so dependable.

I never imagined he could be that kind of person.

"I was going to keep it, but… it ran away. It slipped out when I left the door open for just a moment."

Hmm. It sounded like a hastily made excuse.

Honestly, it seemed more plausible that he'd never intended to keep the cat at all.

But then again, he had bought a bed and litter box. If he wasn't planning to use them, why go to the trouble of buying them? That didn't add up.

"…Are you being serious?"

I couldn't be sure if he was lying or not, so I decided to press a little further.

"…Yeah, I'm serious. I didn't think it'd bolt that quickly. I wanted to take care of it…"

Could he really be faking that expression and tone? Dogeon looked genuinely regretful.

If a pet I'd picked out suddenly ran away, I'd probably feel pretty upset too. Maybe I was being too harsh.

"Ah… so that's how it is. Sorry for bringing it up…"

"Why are you apologizing? It's the cat's fault."

I had more things to ask him—like why he'd been acting so friendly with other girls lately, or why he'd been meeting Anastasia alone. But now didn't seem like the right time.

"…Want me to catch it for you?"

Dogeon seemed down, and if the cat was the root of the issue, maybe catching it and bringing it back would fix things.

"What? I mean, if you could, that'd be great. Thanks, but… it seemed really wary of people. I don't think even you could catch it…"

Even after being abandoned by the cat, Dogeon was more worried about it than upset.

Oh, don't worry, buddy—or should I say big bro…? No, maybe big sis fits better. Either way, I've got a plan.

"Just tell me where you've seen it hanging around. I'll catch it and bring it back in no time."

Back home, I'd once gotten a wild hawk to perch on my arm. I regretted it immediately, of course—it was ridiculously heavy, had sharp talons, and terrifying strength.

I couldn't understand animals, but I could make them understand me.

If a hawk listened to me, a cat would be easy.

"…I usually saw it near the flowerbeds by our dorm."

Flowerbeds, huh? That's not far.

No point in delaying, so I grabbed Dogeon's hand and started heading toward his dorm to gather the supplies I'd need to lure the cat.

But this time, Dogeon didn't let me drag him along as easily as before.

"…You're not coming?"

The usually pliant Dogeon, who would let himself be dragged along with barely a word, was oddly immobile this time. Curious, I asked him why.

“Sorry. I made a promise to Anya. It’s important, and I can’t delay it or bring you along. It won’t take long, though…”

Ah, so he had plans with Anya. And he didn’t think to tell me.

I guess spending time with me isn’t important, huh?

The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them. I’ve been clinging to Dogeon a lot lately, and maybe I should give him some space.

Everyone deserves some privacy, after all… as long as he’s not using it to charm another girl.

Then again, maybe that’s just his destiny as the protagonist of a harem story.

When women throw themselves at you without any effort on your part, what can you do? If I were living his life, I’d probably enjoy it too.

“…I see. Well, have a good talk! I’ll wait for you…”

Yeah, go ahead and have your cozy little chat with her.

Meanwhile, I’ll be out here, catching a cat for you.

“…Sorry. I’ll make it up to you later—take you wherever you want to go.”

No need for that. Just being around is enough.

No need to make promises or drag it out—better to move on quickly.

My first stop? The dumpster.

Why the dumpster? I needed a box.

Despite being a dumpster, the academy's cleanliness standards made it surprisingly tolerable.

I quickly found a sturdy cardboard box in good condition.

Having gotten what I came for, I should've left immediately. But I spotted a box just the right size for me to fit into.

…No one's around. What harm could it do?

When I was younger, I nearly suffocated after crawling into a box and getting stuck, so I'd always been wary of enclosed spaces. But this box didn't lock, and I could tear it open if needed.

Just once.

I glanced around nervously before carefully crawling inside.

"…Huh."

It was cramped and dark, and for a moment, I felt a bit short of breath. But soon, the snug space felt oddly cozy.

Warm and safe. Maybe I could stay here a little longer.

It was that same comforting feeling of "just five more minutes" you get when lying in bed.

If I compared it to a bed, the box was worse in every way—dirtier, less comfortable. And yet, somehow, it felt better.

I stayed there for a while, savoring my secret moment of peace.

Who knew boxes could be this great?

But my bliss didn't last.

From far away, I suddenly felt a massive collision of mana and divine power.

Startled, I clumsily tumbled out of the box. I'd never experienced a shockwave that intense before.

Grabbing the box I planned to use for the cat, I rushed outside—but everything was eerily normal.

…What? That felt like a bomb went off. But the campus was completely peaceful.

Focusing my senses, I tried to pick up any signs of disruption. But all I heard were girls giggling, boys exchanging dirty jokes, and the general hubbub of campus life.

…Maybe I imagined it?

Confused, I decided to focus on the task at hand.

Heading toward the flowerbeds by the dorms, I finally spotted the cat.

True to Dogeon's description, the moment it saw me, it began retreating cautiously. It would probably bolt at the slightest provocation.

Well, you should've been more selective about who you run from.

Locking eyes with the cat, I sent it a very clear message.

-Get into this box now, or I'll kill you.

The cat, apparently unwilling to die, obediently climbed into the box I'd placed on the ground.

"…Good kitty."

It was scruffy, but nothing a good bath couldn't fix.

Since I was the one who caught it, I had no doubt Dogeon would take excellent care of it.

As for the name… That wasn't my decision to make.

It was up to Dogeon, the cat's rightful owner.

Carrying the box with the bedraggled feline inside, I headed to Dogeon's room.

-The person who lives here will take care of you. If you run again, you'll die by my hands.

The cat, trembling without making a sound, seemed to understand.

With that settled, all I had to do was wait.

Dogeon said he wouldn't take long, so I busied myself setting up the cat's supplies.

I poured litter into the box, set up the cage, and placed the food where it was easy to find.

…

…Dogeon's late…

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 79

Chapter 79: Ignorance is Strength

“I conveyed Dogeon’s proposal, but… hmm. Camilla says she already has plans at that time. I’m sorry.”

Once again, I tried to arrange a private meeting with Camilla through Anya’s connections, but I failed. At first, I shrugged it off, but now I could tell.

Camilla didn’t want to meet me.

I had a rough idea why. Hoyeon had used every means possible to make it to the academy on time, and Camilla seemed to be one of the victims of her methods.

Maybe she hated me, too, since I was practically a package deal with Hoyeon. I didn’t catch every word while talking with Anya, but I could hear the raised voices.

“No, it’s fine. If I ask again another day, she might agree.”

I couldn’t give up, so my only option was to keep begging until she agreed to meet me. Who would’ve thought the snowball from the midterm exams would roll this far?

No, actually, with Hoyeon around, things probably went wrong from the very start.

“But, uh… Dogeon, why are you so insistent on meeting Camilla? Don’t tell me you…”

“It’s not anything like romantic interest. There’s something I need to apologize for personally. A letter just feels too insincere.”

Honestly, I didn’t find her particularly appealing. That noble-lady trope didn’t seem charming to me. Besides, she caused trouble a few times in the original story.

It felt more like I was approaching her out of necessity for the happy ending. Anya would probably insist on meeting her regardless, though.

Of course, so would Hoyeon. As for Cecilia… Well, she was so pure that she didn’t pique my interest. Sure, spending time with her might be comfortable, but there wasn’t much appeal.

To put it bluntly, she felt more like a servant. It’s not the kindest thing to say, but no better word came to mind.

“Oh… I see. Well, Dogeon, forgive me, but you’re known for playing with women’s hearts, so I guess Camilla is another victim.”

I hadn’t done anything like that yet, but I couldn’t argue because I’d have to fake confessions of love in the future.

“Haha… Let’s just leave it at that for now.”

All I could do was laugh awkwardly and defuse the situation.

“Dogeon… You shouldn’t do that. Do you even realize how much Hoyeon cares about you? Even if the rumors are a bit exaggerated… She cherishes you deeply. Yet here you are, trying to meet another girl. Haven’t you thought about how that could hurt Hoyeon, even if you don’t mean for it to?”

Anya, who wasn’t one to talk much, said something surprisingly long-winded. Hearing her words, any feelings of surprise quickly faded.

I knew how deeply Hoyeon valued me. When we were alone, she'd treat me casually, calling me her closest friend.

And I knew I was the only one she acted that way with. If I hadn't read the author's Q&A, I wouldn't be running around like this now.

What was supposed to be an advantage—knowing the story—had turned into a shackle, binding me. It was ridiculous, but now that I knew, there was no escaping it.

I didn't know what happened after the bad ending or exactly how the happy ending played out, but there was no other choice but to aim for the happy ending.

"I understand. Still, if I don't apologize, I feel like something irreversible will happen."

So, all I could do was avoid giving a clear answer and convince myself I was doing my best.

Other web novel protagonists started out as overpowered. Why did this author make me so unimpressive from the start, only to eventually turn me into one?

"If you understand, then just leave. I bet you snuck here without telling anyone again, right?"

"…I didn't sneak in. I just didn't say anything."

"Are you even sane?! Boldly admitting you're meeting another girl! Go back right now!"

Maybe I was too honest because Anya freaked out and practically shoved me out the door. She wasn't annoyed—just genuinely alarmed. This time, it was definitely my fault.

She might still be struggling to find the nonexistent cat.

Thinking about that, I couldn't afford to dawdle. She might still be searching for the cat, so I activated my mana and dashed to the flower bed.

And there was no one there.

…Good. She must have given up and gone back inside. If she'd kept looking, she would've been really upset.

Relieved, I grabbed the doorknob, but an inexplicable sense of unease washed over me. For some reason, I felt like something was behind the door.

If anything, it'd just be Hoyeon… but I couldn't shake the feeling there was something more.

"Dogeon… you're here…? Look, I caught the cat. What do you think…?"

And as the saying goes, "what you dread most happens." What I saw was something I never would have imagined.

Hoyeon was proudly holding out a cat she'd somehow caught—where or how, I had no idea—as if asking for praise.

I had lied about the cat, but where on earth had she found one? Knowing her personality, she wouldn't have gone out to buy it. She didn't have the time for that, either.

"Hoyeon… where exactly did you find this cat?"

"Oh… the cat? It was in the flower bed…?"

There shouldn't have been any cats near the dormitory. Did one wander in from outside? I couldn't figure it out.

"Oh, I see. Yeah, that's the one I was looking for."

Its white belly and black back reminded me of Hoyeon somehow. The golden eyes made it even more so.

But that aside, I was in a tough spot now.

The cat supplies I bought were just a cover to purchase catnip. If I'd only bought the catnip, it would've seemed suspicious.

Originally, I was only going to buy food, but she didn't like that idea, so I had to act as if I was actually raising a cat.

Was this karma for my lies? If so, I'd have to accept it.

"So… what do you want to name it?"

It seemed like I'd end up raising it. I didn't intend to, but since Hoyeon brought it, I couldn't ignore it.

"A name… hmm."

Half black, half white—maybe Asura? No, that was too corny. I couldn't think of anything better.

After all, this cat only existed in my imagination before. Of course, it didn't have a name. One idea did come to mind, but I wasn't sure if it was good.

"Yunho… is that too much…?"

Since it was Hoyeon's cat, I reversed her name. Hoyeon… Yunho. It felt like a terrible idea, but the alternatives were worse.

"Yunho… Yunho. Hmm. I like it!"

But Hoyeon enthusiastically approved, even of such a terrible name. Or maybe she genuinely thought it was a good one.

…I really put no thought into that name.

"Alright, let's go with Yunho. From now on, your name is Yunho. Hello."

"Meooow…"

What was I supposed to do to raise a cat? I had seen a few things about it before, but now I couldn't remember anything.

For now, I was holding the cat Hoyeon handed over to me, but I had no idea where to start. Should I feed it first?

"You must've had a hard time finding it, Hoyeon."

"Oh, not at all. It was nothing. Let me know if you ever want to raise a lion in the future—I'll catch one for you!"

Surely, what she just said was a joke… right?

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Iris sat in an empty room, trying to figure out why she was there.

She had come to attend one of Stefania's infamous "special lessons," which had become a part of her daily routine. Yet, for some reason, the room was completely empty.

Usually, Stefania would be waiting with a candle and a whip to greet her. It was an experience Iris could never get used to, but now, even the absence of that dreaded routine was making her more uneasy.

The silence in the room was so oppressive it felt as though it might be better if Stefania suddenly appeared from behind her—or even if a corpse fell from the ceiling. Anything was preferable to this stifling stillness.

Exhausted from the punishments disguised as lessons that Stefania had imposed on her for failing to guard or monitor her properly during the midterms, Iris was in an even weaker state than usual.

"This isn't funny, Lady Stefania. Please come out…!"

Squeezing her eyes shut, Iris braced herself, mentally preparing for whatever punishment might await her as she called out Stefania's name.

Even if she got hurt, Stefania would heal her quickly anyway.

But what Iris expected did not happen.

The room remained steeped in awkward silence and darkness, its eerie stillness fueling her anxious imagination.

"…Ugh… But I can't just leave, can I?"

If, by any chance, Stefania was delayed because of some urgent matter, Iris feared what Stefania might do to her for not waiting. Trapped in this dilemma, she couldn't bring herself to leave or stay.

Why did the sins of her parents have to fall on her? It was her parents who owed Stefania a debt—why was she the one paying for it?

But when she thought of her younger sibling's face, Iris quickly resigned herself. If she didn't endure Stefania's wrath, her sadistic tendencies would inevitably turn toward her sibling instead.

As Iris continued to waver between determination and doubt, she caught the faint scent of blood in the air.

Today, she must be tormenting me with blood-soaked towels. I'd prefer the whip to this. With that thought, Iris opened her eyes—and what she saw was beyond anything she had imagined.

There, Stefania lay collapsed on the ground, drenched in blood and gasping for breath.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 80

Chapter 80: Confession

——?

Iris's thoughts came to a halt. Before her eyes was Stefania, covered in blood, suddenly appearing out of nowhere.

That much, she could understand. Who had done this, and how someone could inflict such devastating wounds on Stefania—those were questions beyond her comprehension.

To Iris, the sight was absurd. Stefania was skilled in magic, capable of instantly sealing wounds or reattaching broken bones. Yet, here she was, utterly destroyed, unable to even lift a finger.

However, Stefania didn't seem to care much about Iris's confusion. With great effort, she spoke.

"…I'm sorry… I'm a little late… Iris. I was busy dealing with some wench… Ugh, that's why I'm late…"

Despite having her right arm severed, her leg bones protruding through torn skin, and her insides spilling out, Stefania still had enough energy to talk.

But that was all she had. She had no mana left and could do nothing but sit and await death.

If no external intervention came, her fate was sealed.

“…Iris. I know this seems sudden, but could you bring me the scroll on the desk…?”

Even as her life ebbed away, Stefania was calculating how to make Iris obey her request.

On one side of the scale was her own life. On the other was the debt Iris’s family owed her.

There was no need to weigh which was heavier.

“If you do as I say… I’ll cancel the special lessons… and the debt your family owes me. I’ll even provide your family with the funds and land to rebuild. What… Do you say?”

For Stefania, this was an incredibly generous offer—ceasing her torment, erasing the debt, and even granting resources. But Iris’s reaction was icy.

“You’re asking me to save you? Hah… Don’t be ridiculous.”

Iris instinctively knew she held the upper hand now. For the first time in her life, she could decide the fate of the woman who had trampled on her for so long.

Naturally, she had no intention of sparing her. Stefania was the type who would claw back anything she had given, by any means necessary.

Iris was certain that Stefania, who had even fabricated debts to exploit them, wouldn’t simply let them go.

“Stefania… I don’t know what happened to you, but it looks like today’s your last day.”

Iris lacked the courage—or the desire—to kill her outright. Why should she bloody her hands? If she left her alone, death would come naturally.

“…No matter what I offer… you won’t accept it, will you?”

“From the moment I met you, I wished you would die. Without pause, without exception. And now you’re asking me to save you? Are you serious?”

The time was too short to vent all the pent-up resentment, but Iris felt a sense of liberation as she expressed her contempt.

This was the end. The endless humiliation, the oppression, the debt—everything.

Stefania’s family essentially revolved around her. The so-called elders were senile beyond help, and the rest were just children with no power.

So letting her die seemed the wisest choice. With that, Iris turned and left the room.

“…See you around.”

“If such a thing were possible.”

Iris didn’t forget to scoff one last time as she closed the door, leaving Stefania in complete darkness, and walked away with a spring in her step.

“…Heh. As expected… those wretches… they’re all the same…”

But Stefania showed only disappointment, betraying no fear of her impending death.

“…Ugh. I really didn’t want to use this method…”

For a moment, she thought it might be better to die. But in the end, she decided it was better to live.

“…Oh, divine one… I offer myself… as your servant… Please… accept me… as your devotee…”

Forcing the words out, Stefania scoffed at her own predicament. How did it come to this?

She had been certain that security was impenetrable.

That's why she had no doubt it was her earlier attacker. And what greeted her there was Gloria.

Not just Gloria, but Gloria channeling a goddess.

No blade of wind or pure mana blast could stop Gloria, who charged relentlessly and swung her sword without hesitation.

However, maintaining divine possession for long was practically suicide, so Gloria didn't pursue Stefania when she fled.

Having exhausted herself to the point of requiring months of recovery, Gloria had to retreat. That was the last image of her Stefania remembered.

Ah, so it's you… The arrogant contractor. What a pitiful sight.

Fury surged momentarily, but Stefania wasn't foolish enough to lose control over fleeting emotions.

"…I… seek forgiveness for the wrongs I've committed…"

Very well. Let me hear them.

***

That's right, Yunho… No, no! Socks aren't toys!!!

Hey, don't bite! Ouch, you little…!

From the sounds coming from the next room, it wasn't hard to imagine what was happening.

The cat that had been calm while I was there was now wreaking havoc as if it owned the place, only an hour after I left.

This is why dogs are better than cats. The one I used to raise was perfect—except for its habit of hovering near the power switch while I gamed or

worked.

…Anyway, I wonder how that one is doing now. It probably didn't survive, considering I was sent here without food for it. Not that it matters anymore.

Let's stop with the gloomy thoughts. Dogeon seems to be struggling to handle the cat. That's not how you do it.

Unless you clearly establish who's in charge, cats will never listen.

I should probably head back to his room soon to straighten things out with that cat.

I wasn't heading to see Dogeon but to train the cat. The last thing I wanted was to hear constant meow-meow noises from the next room every night.

As I walked into Dogeon's room—where I'd started to come and go as naturally as if it were my own—I was greeted by the sight of Dogeon holding the cat, getting scratched all over.

"This little…! Oh, Hoyeon."

"I could tell something wasn't going well just from the noise… I came to help. Mind letting me hold it for a moment?"

Dog scratches ran in vertical lines across Dogeon's face, though his mysterious magi or whatever quickly healed him.

The cat seemed to sense this too and wasn't really holding back.

Still…

You have no right to scratch someone like him.

Even though I had given him the cat, I couldn't stand it hurting Dogeon.

Never defy his words again. If you do, it won't just end with death.

The cat might be a little stressed out now, but wasn't this better than a life of scavenging for food and starving outside?

The cat seemed to understand my intentions clearly because it immediately sent signs of submission, trembling in fear.

Animals were funny that way—so respectful toward those higher in rank. In some ways, they were better than humans, especially when it came to instinctively recognizing their place.

"Uh… Hoyeon. Just staring at the cat doesn't seem like it'll solve anything…"

"It's done."

"What? You just stared at it!"

Dogoeon didn't seem to have noticed anything. Well, he's only human, so I didn't have high expectations. My mother always said it's best not to expect much from humans.

Although her expression always seemed like she did hope for something from them. I decided to take her words literally.

"It won't act up or scratch you anymore."

Cats weren't meant to be ruled by brute force or dominance.

I might be able to manage that way, but Dogeon, being human, couldn't. I'd have to explain how to handle it properly.

So, I gave Dogeon a simple crash course in cat care. Don't invade its territory. Use treats, not punishment. Don't take its indifferent attitude personally—it's just how they are.

Dogeon seemed to grasp the basics and was reflecting on his earlier actions.

"…Ah, so that's why it scratched me."

“That’s probably it. I wouldn’t be scratched, but these little ones tend to tremble and panic over even the slightest raised voice.”

“Uh… huh? What?”

“And unlike me, it won’t understand your words or follow you around. Yeah, friends are way better than cats… huh?”

…Wait a second. What did I just say?

“No, that’s not what I meant… Anyway! You shouldn’t… expect too much from a cat…”

In my brief distraction, nonsense slipped out, and I tried to cover it up, but it only backfired spectacularly.

Now it sounded like I was jealous of the cat…! I mean, I appreciated Dogeon’s genuine interest in it, but still…

“Oh, I see. Uh. Thanks for the advice.”

Dogeon was clearly doing his best to let my slip-up slide, but it looked as awkward as a rusty machine forcing itself to move.

“Can you pretend you didn’t hear that…?”

I decided to admit my mistake outright and ask him to let it go. Embarrassing, but the surest way.

“…Yeah. I’ll do that. But about what you just said earlier…”

“I said pretend you didn’t hear it…!”

Unable to bear the embarrassment, I gave Dogeon a nyang-nyang punch with my fists.

Cats shouldn’t do that, but I could get away with it. After all, I’m not a cat.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 81

Chapter 81: That seems good for you

Even the goddess couldn't provide Cecilia with a clear answer. As a result, Cecilia spent two weeks hovering around Dogeon and Hoyeon without any progress.

Though she maintained amicable relationships with the other humans she had befriended, she couldn't approach Dogeon.

Every time she tried, Hoyeon would either drive her away or completely avoid her, making it impossible for Cecilia to get any clues.

Though she observed that the bullying wasn't particularly intense, that brought her little comfort.

After all, bullying was still bullying. If it had been just humans involved, she might have dismissed it as a human quarrel. But since a beastkin was tormenting a human, Cecilia became resolute in her determination to help Dogeon.

"If you can't rely on roots, rely on the stem." If she couldn't get help from the gods, she could seek advice from her friends. With that thought, Cecilia continued to gather opinions and advice.

Even the goddess had once left her a piece of advice: "Don't depend on me too much. Seek answers on your own."

"Long time no see, Cecilia."

“Yes, it has been a while, Iris. You look well. Have you been doing better lately?”

“Do I? Well, yes, I’ve been taking it easy these days. So, what brings you here?”

With that, Cecilia sought out Iris, someone she had previously gotten to know. While there were many others she could have consulted, she chose Iris for one specific reason.

“…I wanted to ask how to deal with bullying.”

Among the many crimes revealed after Stefania went missing was her long-term harassment of Iris.

Cecilia wanted to ask Iris, the victim, how one could stop bullying.

“Yes… Someone I know is going through something similar to what you experienced, Iris. I want to help them, but… I don’t know how.”

For a moment, memories of the past hardened Iris’s expression, but she soon regained her usual bright smile.

The one who had tormented her was dead, or at least gone, and would never interfere in her life again.

“Hmm… That’s a tough one. It’s really not an easy problem, Cecilia. First, you have to figure out why they’re being bullied. Only then can you do something about it.”

Iris knew that Stefania had tormented her out of twisted interest.

If the person Cecilia wanted to help was being harassed for a similar reason, Iris was determined to help. No one understood that kind of pain better than she did.

“I think… It’s because they’re interested in them. To be honest, it feels like they see them as their possession…”

“Are they using their power to suppress them or flaunting their superiority to torment them?”

“Yes! How did you know so… Oh, sorry, Cecilia.”

“No, it’s fine. She’s gone now. Anyway… I see.”

Noticing why Cecilia had apologized, Iris reassured her. It was a reaction unimaginable from the timid person she had once been.

Since Stefania’s disappearance, Iris has gained more emotional stability. The girl who once flinched at the sight of a bug now calmly observed which type it was.

After comparing her own experiences with Cecilia’s account, Iris shared her thoughts.

“There’s no solution.”

“Pardon…?”

“Cecilia, I don’t know who you’re trying to help, but as someone with experience, let me be honest with you.”

Iris spoke fervently, recounting why there was no clear answer and why it was difficult to intervene.

“…In short, unless the bully suddenly disappears, there’s no hope. There’s also the chance that they’ll lose interest and let go, but from what you’ve said, that doesn’t seem likely. It’s like hoping a tiger will spit out the meat it’s holding.”

“I see…”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“Oh, no… It’s me who should apologize for bothering you during your precious rest time. Thank you for your valuable advice. If… If you’re free, maybe we could share a meal sometime…”

“Of course. Anytime.”

As Iris wished Cecilia success, her eyes caught a glimpse of a head of black and white hair.

However, unlike before, seeing Hoyeon didn’t unsettle her.

There was no need to approach that calamity, nor did that calamity have any reason to come toward her.

It felt like observing a predator passing by from afar.

Until Hoyeon walked toward them. Fixing her gaze on Cecilia and Iris, she approached with clear intent.

Iris tensed.

Why was Hoyeon, who looked far more irritated than usual, coming their way? Was there a reason?

Could it be… was she aiming to become a second Stefania?

“You…!”

Thankfully, before Iris’s fear-fueled imagination could spiral further, Hoyeon stopped in front of Cecilia.

“Cecilia. Come with me.”

***

I’m talking about the heat cycle. It was bound to return after a month.

Remembering the disgraceful mess I made during the last one, I set some strict rules for this time as soon as I sensed it starting.

No physical contact with Dogeon.

…Yeah, I know it's an unreasonable rule. But I still wasn't ready to cross the line between friendship and something more.

Yet my body was screaming for me to cross it, so the only choice was to cut off the source of temptation entirely. Mom had also said she wasn't ready to be a grandma.

I hadn't informed Dogeon beforehand, but I planned to spend this time apart. It should be fine.

I couldn't keep clinging to Dogeon under the guise of friendship forever. Besides, I had my own matters to investigate.

…Even so, I couldn't shake the discomfort. Just imagining him eating with another girl made my stomach churn.

Maybe that's why everything felt so disgusting today. It was probably just my mood, but it was infuriating all the same.

I need to figure out what's up with Cecilia's weird spirit and meet Dogeon again quickly.

"…But where is Cecilia, anyway?"

As I walked, I realized I had no idea where Cecilia was. Cursing my heat-addled brain, I thought of places where people might gather.

…Maybe I'll try the café first.

Normally, I'd be too self-conscious to go somewhere like this, but right now, I don't have the mental capacity to care about that.

All I wanted was to wrap this up quickly and check on what Dogeon was up to.

By sheer luck, Cecilia was in the café, talking to someone. Who was that again… Iris, maybe?

Not that it mattered. I had no business with her, so it wasn't important. As I walked toward Cecilia, her expression changed for some reason, but since she was naturally timid, I didn't think much of it.

"You…!"

Cecilia looked at me with a startled expression, as if wondering why I was there.

"Cecilia. Follow me."

I had no intention or obligation to explain myself to her. In fact, her questioning only irritated me, so I delivered my words a little more sharply than usual.

I could have handled this here, but I didn't like having too many eyes watching.

"What are you up to?"

"Do I really need to say it twice?"

I could have phrased it more nicely, but for some reason, my words came out pointed. Maybe it was because she was one of those girls who kept clinging to Dogeon.

"…Fine. Let's hear it, then."

"Hmph."

She could have just agreed from the start instead of wasting time with a pointless power struggle.

I led her out of the café to a quieter area. Cecilia, seemingly uneasy about my actions, surrounded herself with spirits.

Well, that saved me the trouble of asking her to summon them. Since she cherished them so much, I had been wondering how to make her bring them out.

Now that I think about it, I hadn't even come up with a proper plan for that. Maybe it's true that I get dumber during the heat cycle.

Still, no matter how much dumber I get, I'm not going to cross the line with Dogeon, so it should be fine to see him.

"…Anima, was it? If you can hear me, answer."

"What? How do you know that name?!"

How do I know? She practically shouted it while stroking them in the arena back then.

Her surprise was understandable, though. She had practically whispered it to herself, so it would have seemed strange for me to hear it from a distance. At least, on this continent.

-…Child of God, bearer of omnipotence…

Oh, it answered. The voice wasn't audible in the traditional sense—it resonated in my head, like when the deity spoke to me. It confirmed that, twisted and fragmented as it was, this thing still originated from the gods.

"You—what are you doing to Anima?! Anima, come back!"

Cecilia, who usually stayed calm and polite no matter what, was visibly angry for once. But right now, figuring out what this "Anima" was took priority.

"Be quiet. Anima, tell me everything you know. Now."

-…Command to return. Confirming authority of the issuer. General user detected. Reassessing priority…

It sounded oddly mechanical. Well, considering that some gods were created as machines, it wasn't entirely surprising. I wondered if this deity had originally possessed a mechanical body as well.

"…Anima? Why won't you come back…?"

-…Command rejected. Reason: A higher-priority command has been identified. Apologies, Cecilia.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 82

Chapter 82: Ah, it's broken now

"…Anima…! Please… come back… Talk to me again… We're friends, aren't we…?"

– Affirmative. Cecilia is my friend. However… commands must be followed.

…Huh. This was starting to make me feel like the villain here. Spirits were more rigid than I thought.

All I wanted was to call it over and ask some questions, but this situation made it seem like I was trying to steal her precious friend.

I'd really just investigate and return it right away. Even if she was one of those girls who clung to Dogeon, seeing her about to cry softened me a bit.

"Fine… then tell me how you ended up like this."

From the looks of it, Anima wasn't going to last much longer. Its dwindling mana was nearly exhausted. At best, it might hold out for a few more months.

– Confirmed. This unit was created approximately 500■ years ago by ■bi. Purpose: Searching for the missing advance party and observing and surveying this continent.

"No need for the detailed backstory. Just explain why you're so 'broken into pieces.'"

Hearing that Mother had created this god didn't surprise me. She had a tendency to create all kinds of things as needed.

For instance, there was the god that wrapped around a mountain like a giant snake; they had originally been a serpent beastkin before Mother selected them to ascend to godhood.

Still, it was impressive that Anima could function in this state. Either Mother's creation was exceptional, or whoever reduced it to this state was remarkable.

-…When we arrived, the advance party had already been killed or ■■. Additionally, we were attacked by the natives.

Apparently, Anima couldn't process multiple commands at once. Even after I told it to skip the lengthy explanations, it persistently continued its tale.

"…Anima, no…"

Meanwhile, Cecilia was now fully crying, slumping to the ground. This wasn't how I wanted things to go…

– The attacking natives were converted using mana. Attempts to utilize them for exploration were thwarted by the 'hero' blessed by the goddess and their group.

…Great. Just great. Nothing ever goes smoothly for me, does it? Well, I suppose I could apologize sincerely later.

– Ho■■: killed. Ken■: killed. Bodies processed postmortem. This unit: divided into 170 parts and processed by the goddess. Bel■gor: killed. Shikari: sealed.

It seemed to be talking about its companions, but whether due to age or its near-broken state, the static was overwhelming.

Still, I could piece the gist together: this goddess and her subordinates had done this to the godMother created.

As expected, if nothing else, the church really needs to be wiped out.

“Anima, you’ve done enough. Now return to your master.”

– Correction: This unit’s master is…

Before Anima could finish, it stopped functioning altogether.

No way.

It must have just paused for a moment. It couldn’t have broken because of me… right? There was no way its mana coincidentally ran out at such a terrible moment.

Huh, the mana reserve reads zero.

“…Anima? Why did you stop…? Anima?”

…So, uh… This means I basically took a friend with only days to live and killed them off, huh.

“Anima…?”

It wasn’t a structural flaw. It was just like a clock stopping because its battery had run out. The problem was there was no way to replace that battery.

Even if I tried pouring the warped mana that surrounded us into it, it’d be like filling a car with cooking oil.

It might run, but only barely, and even if it did, it’d ruin the machine. There really was no solution, was there?

…What now? Returning it like this was no different than saying, ‘Oops, it’s broken. Here you go.’ But I had no way to fix it either.

“No… no way, right? Anima… No…”

“…Haa.”

This was a no-win situation. Leaving it here felt wrong, but there was nothing I could do to help.

The frustrating air felt even more suffocating, sticking to my skin.

…Wait. Air.

Suddenly, I thought of the green orb in my pocket. It was thanks to the mana it emitted that I could breathe comfortably up until now.

Maybe this could supply mana to the spirit. It wouldn't be much—just barely enough to keep it alive—but it might be sufficient to handle the immediate situation.

There was no time to hesitate. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the green orb, making up my mind.

With determination, I crushed it in my hand in front of the spirit.

Juice—or something hard to describe—spurted out, scattering mana in all directions.

– Mana detected.

Fortunately, my guess was right. The spirits, including Anima, reacted immediately, hungrily devouring the mana and starting to recover.

"Sniff… Anima…? Wait, the spirits…?"

Cecilia, still crying, noticed the commotion and turned her teary eyes toward me.

"…Is that… the World Tree's fruit? How did you… No, more importantly, why does it lack the goddess's blessing?!"

Oh, so this was the World Tree's fruit… huh?

Wait a second, why does Dogeon even have something like this? Not that I have any right to ask, considering I took it without permission.

Was it some kind of protagonist privilege? I was confused. The thing I'd been carrying around all this time turned out to be a treasure like the World Tree's fruit?

Then again, the World Tree was supposed to be in our continent. Its appearance was completely different from what I remembered.

"…I have no reason to explain it to you."

I don't even know myself.

Anyway, since I'd managed to fix Anima, it was probably time for me to leave.

"…Wait! Who exactly are you?!"

"You don't need to know."

What could I even say to that? She already knew I was Baek Hoyeon from the east, so what else was there?

I had no further reason to stay. My business was with her spirit, not her.

"Wait…! I still have questions—Oh, Anima! Are you okay?!"

I shoved Anima toward her, and she quickly turned her attention to it, fussing over its state. Understandable.

The thought of a friend, thought to be dead, coming back to life meant checking to ensure they were alright. If it were Dogeon, I would have dropped everything to do the same.

As I fled using a somewhat cowardly method, I was greeted by the foul air I hadn't smelled in a long time.

…Would that thing still be in Dogeon's locker? I should check on it while meeting him.

– – – –

Having learned why her subordinates, sent to the continent where her disciple had fled, were unable to respond, she was quite satisfied with the unexpected information.

She already knew her disciple was exceptional, but to think they would go so far as to reverse-engineer something she had created. Though pleased with her disciple's growth, that sentiment soon faded.

This was her disciple's achievement, not humanity's.

Resetting the life-giving tree to create a species for humanity was undoubtedly a remarkable feat, even in her eyes, but it wasn't of great significance to Byeolbi.

After all, it did not answer her question.

The question posed by the observer, a fragment of herself severed from her main body, was simple: Can humanity endure today's suffering for tomorrow's peace?

Out of compassion for the species, she had devised a plan to suppress humanity's self-awareness for 3,000 years, allowing them to focus solely on technological advancement. Once they reached a sufficient level, she intended to restore their self-awareness.

Her disciple's response to that question was swift. The very next day, they led humanity to flee to another continent and isolated it from the rest of the world.

Byeolbi did not pursue her disciple. Even as a discarded fragment of the main body, the observer remained an observer.

Non-interference above all else. That was the first directive of the observer.

And so, she waited.

She waited for the day her disciple would return to her with an answer.

However, she didn’t remain idle. She sent subordinates to investigate her disciple’s actions and even attempted to observe the continent herself.

Despite all attempts ending in failure, she felt no urgency. No matter how exceptional they were, her disciple was bound to return to her eventually.

Like a teacher patiently waiting for a runaway student, Byeolbi awaited her disciple with calm anticipation.

“…My lady. What are you pondering so deeply?”

“Ah, my lord. It’s nothing of consequence.”

While Jeongho actively prepared to conquer her disciple’s continent, that ambition was entirely his own.

His pure yet foolish dream of uniting all races and worlds under his rule to create a world free of war had been enough to pique Byeolbi’s interest in him.

“Soon… the day will come when we create a world without strife.”

“You surely understand better than anyone how impossible that is, my lord.”

Even in an ant colony, where self-awareness is almost nonexistent, conflicts arise. Attempting to unite self-aware humans under absolute power was, to her, an absurd notion.

Yet, Byeolbi couldn’t deny that it would be fascinating if he succeeded.

“I know. But I want to leave an empire to my child—one where no bloodshed or tragedy touches them. Wouldn’t it be fitting to end such suffering in my generation?”

Before they had a child, he had been a man who followed her blindly. But after becoming a father, he had transformed into someone who actively sought to achieve something meaningful. Byeolbi found this shift endlessly intriguing.

Though she wore the guise of a human, she did not fully grasp the essence of humanity.

“If that is what you believe, my lord, I shall assist you to the best of my ability.”

“Your support is most reassuring, my lady.”

Observing life forms was a truly enjoyable experience, Byeolbi thought.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 83

Chapter 83: You're terrible at this

Since it was the weekend, the hallways were bustling with kids chatting. Unlike last time, stealing something openly wasn't an option.

Even if my head wasn't working right due to the heat cycle, I wasn't careless enough to make such a basic mistake. The accident with the spirit? That doesn't count—I didn't know what I was dealing with.

And I did fix it, didn't I? Doesn't matter how the process went, as long as the result was good.

I casually walked into Dogeon's room as if it were my own. Yeonho, perched in his little nest, was grooming his fur. The moment he saw me enter, he leapt into the air in shock.

Ouch. It kind of stung to see him so openly afraid of me.

Dogeon, meanwhile, was still sound asleep. Since I hadn't woken him today, he seemed to have forgotten how to wake up on his own.

Maybe he stayed up late, but still—he'd been asleep for over nine hours. Humans can survive just fine on 4–5 hours of sleep. Isn't he overdoing it?

I was about to wake him the usual way—by brushing my tail against his nose—but then I remembered my self-imposed "no physical contact" rule. I stopped myself just before my tail made contact.

"…That was close."

It’s scary how strong habits can be. I’d only been doing that for about a month, yet my body acted on its own.

Dogeon, the actual subject of my inner conflict, lay sprawled out without a care in the world, completely oblivious to my presence.

I felt ridiculous for worrying about him meeting other girls. A guy snoring away like that wasn’t about to meet anyone.

Hard, scary tasks like meeting girls require getting up early, preparing thoroughly, and psyching yourself up.

“Yeonho. Come here for a second.”

I called out to Yeonho, who had been nervously watching me. His face clearly said, What does she want now? I picked him up and plopped him down on top of Dogeon.

“…Still not waking up. Alright, you can go back now.”

Yeonho gave me a look of pure resentment, but I generously let it slide this time.

Still, no matter how defenseless people are when they sleep, this was excessive. If I had any ill intent, I could’ve done something awful to him, and he wouldn’t even notice.

Wait. I could just pick him up and take him away right now, couldn’t I? He wouldn’t even know.

No, what am I thinking? Kidnapping is a step too far. At most, I could invite him over to my place one day—casually, of course.

“…Hey, wake up.”

I gently tugged at the edge of his blanket, urging him to get up. If I didn’t, he’d probably sleep all day, and I really didn’t want that.

“…Huh? Wait, why are you… not wearing clothes?!”

Seriously? He usually slept fully dressed, so why today, of all days, did he decide to sleep shirtless?

And of course, as if to rub salt in the wound, his body was absurdly well-built. It felt like my sense of male pride was taking a hit.

Feeling an inexplicable sense of defeat, I threw the blanket over his face. Not because I was embarrassed or anything.

I mean, sure, I'm a girl now, but I used to be a guy. There's no way I'd get flustered or excited over another guy's body.

The pain in my lower abdomen? That's just a heat cycle thing. Nothing more.

"…Hoyeon? What time is it?"

Finally deciding to get up, Dogeon groggily asked me the time, still half-asleep and barely processing the situation.

"Ugh…"

"Put some clothes on. Right now!"

I had no interest in his impromptu strip show. He needed to cover up before my brain overheated.

I tossed his clothes onto his face and even turned around out of courtesy.

Just in case, I threw some underwear into the pile. Surely no one actually sleeps completely naked, right? Still, better safe than sorry.

"…Oh, right. Thanks, Hoyeon. That was a close one."

As I heard the sound of him getting dressed, I muttered complaints about how he was acting like some savage. When he finally said he was done, I turned back around.

And then I noticed.

His underwear wasn't there.

…

"…Dogeon."

He must've realized what I was about to say because he hastily started explaining himself.

"…You see, sometimes people feel like doing something they wouldn't normally do. Last night, it was hot, and I thought, Why not try sleeping like this for once? I… uh… forgot you might come in. Sorry."

I understood perfectly, but somehow, something he said felt even more annoying.

"…You forgot about me. Even though I wake you up every day."

"Well, uh, I was really sleepy, you know… Haha…"

I almost reached out to grab his head in frustration but stopped myself. Calm down. Be understanding.

"…Fine. It happens. Just don't do it again, okay?"

"Right, got it."

I made it clear that his room wasn't exclusively his private space anymore, then slumped into a chair across the room.

"…By the way, Hoyeon, you seem pretty free today."

"Huh? I'm busy watching you."

What does he mean "free"? Watching him is my task right now. He probably just saw me as a bored friend dropping by.

"Oh… I see. Well, I don't have much to do today either. Want to go somewhere?"

With my green orb gone, I wasn't in the mood to go outside.

"No. Not today."

"Alright… Then how about we play a simple game? Sitting around like this is kind of boring."

Sure, what Dogeon had in mind was probably something simple like rock-paper-scissors or Cham Cham Cham. But when two people get together, even watching leaves roll by can become entertaining, so it didn't matter.

"…Sounds fine to me."

"The winner can ask the loser anything they want… How about those rules? Is that okay?"

Oh? He was the one suggesting a wager this time.

Last time, I lost because the heavens decided to play a cruel joke on me. But this time, it was going to be a pure contest of skill, so I was confident.

After all, I'm a beastkin. I have animal instincts, don't I?

No matter how much of a protagonist he is, there's no way I'd lose to a mere human. I can predict the flight path of a mosquito; surely, I can guess one of three choices in rock-paper-scissors.

"Are you confident? I'm planning to settle the score from last time."

"Of course I'm confident."

Hoho, I liked his boldness. As expected of my—

Wait, no. That's not what I meant.

…Ugh. My mind's slowly getting eaten up by my body's instincts. Maybe I shouldn't have seen him at all today, like I resolved this morning.

"Hoyeon, are you feeling alright? Your face is kind of red."

There wasn't anything wrong with my health, but… maybe my head wasn't in the best shape.

"No? Not at all! I'm perfectly fine!"

"Alright, let's start, then."

He grinned and suggested we begin, fully aware I wasn't fine. Typical of him.

"Loser takes the blame… Rock-paper…"

I focused all my senses on reading his next move. It was 100% going to be scissors. My instincts told me so.

""Paper!!""

But Dogeon played rock, the same as me. How? It was definitely going to be scissors.

"…A tie."

Something felt off. I had given it my all, absolutely certain of my instincts. There was no way I could be wrong, so why did we tie? This method had even worked against my black wolf elder brother.

Dogeon, seemingly unfazed, readied himself for the next round with a look of mild disappointment. Hold on. Something's weird here.

"Dogeon, wait. Something's wrong…!"

I couldn't accept the situation. My instincts couldn't be wrong, and yet this was happening.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me you're backing out. Are you… scared of losing?"

"…No. Forget it."

His comment immediately snapped me back to my senses. How could I back down after being accused of chickening out?

“Alright, then. Again. Loser takes the blame…”

“Rock-paper-scissors!”

If my instincts were messed up because of the heat cycle, then I’d just throw out anything at random. My instincts told me he’d play paper this time, but for some reason, I felt like scissors was the right call.

So I played rock, but Dogeon… actually played paper.

“Oh, I won.”

Was he somehow deceiving himself as he played? Or did he know I was relying on instincts? Either way, it was unsettling.

“…So? What’s your question?”

I couldn’t hide my annoyance and answered curtly. Dogeon didn’t seem to care, looking at me with a strangely serious expression.

“Well… this might be a sensitive topic, but Hoyeon, do you not have a heat cycle?”

“…What.”

Neither my body nor my brain could process what he’d just said. Comparing it to human terms, he had basically asked a girl, Do you not get your period?

What the…

A hundred thoughts swirled in my mind, but I couldn’t get a single one out of my mouth. I didn’t even know what I was supposed to say.

After what felt like an eternity of deliberation, I finally managed to utter one word.

“……No.”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 84

Chapter 84: Chicken Game

Spending time freely with Hoyeon, I had come to realize a few things. One of them was that she didn't seem to have a heat cycle.

By nature, beastkin were supposed to experience their heat every month. Yet, for some reason, there was no sign of that with her.

Typically, a beastkin in heat would get noticeably dumber or lose control, clinging to just about anyone. But she displayed none of those behaviors.

Even that black wolf had visited brothels to deal with his urges, and other proud beastkin heroines in the story ended up rolling around with the protagonist during their heat.

Hoyeon, who reacted normally to catnip, somehow didn't seem to experience the heat cycle. Was it because her bloodline carried divine essence?

I couldn't help but be curious.

"So, uh… this might be a bit of a sensitive topic. Hoyeon, do you… not have a heat cycle?"

I was 90% sure she didn't. Still, I wanted to confirm it directly from her.

I expected her answer to be, Of course not.

"…"

While I didn’t mean anything by it, I wondered if even our close relationship couldn’t make up for the awkwardness of the question.

When I first asked, I hadn’t thought much about it. But thinking it over again, it was almost like asking a girlfriend about her menstrual cycle.

Even with our closeness, maybe I’d overstepped this time. I was about to tell her she didn’t have to answer when she responded.

“…No.”

She said, No.

…Uh. Wait a second. What does a guy do when his girlfriend answers a terrible question like that?

“So… you don’t get a heat cycle.”

Desperately wishing for this to blow over, I tried to act like it was no big deal.

Can’t we just pretend this didn’t happen?

“…I do get one!”

But Hoyeon, seemingly oblivious to my hopes, firmly corrected me. She does have a heat cycle.

“…R-right. So, you do…”

Blushing furiously, she stared straight at me without looking away.

“…Why are you reacting like that?! I’m in heat right now!”

The one who asked the question had no idea how to respond. What was I supposed to do with this information?

Had she answered honestly just because I asked? Or was there another meaning behind it? Watching her boldly announce her heat cycle left me

speechless.

Ah, so she's in heat right now.

…And? What was I supposed to do about it? I still feared the people backing her too much to risk making a move.

More than that, I had a gut feeling that pushing any further would lead to something irreversible.

"…Alright, next round—"

"Hey."

My attempt to move on was thwarted by Hoyeon, who didn't seem willing to let it slide.

Her gaze bore into me with a dangerous glint I hadn't seen in a while, her voice low and heavy with tension. If I tried to brush this off, my life might actually be in danger.

Specifically, I had the distinct impression she'd pin me down and kidnap me.

"…You can't just ask something like that… and then act like it's no big deal. At least act a little surprised or something…"

Expecting her to strike me, I squeezed my eyes shut, but the blow never came.

Her hand was raised, fist clenched, but she seemed frozen, unable to follow through.

"…Ugh. Pet me… or, I don't know… just do something. Not now, though!"

I had no idea what she actually wanted, but at least my head was intact. Even with my semi-immortal body, her punches could make me see stars.

She stomped back to her seat in a stiff, awkward manner. Her behavior was off—though, of course, it made sense given she was in heat.

Still, something about today felt different. There hadn't been a single instance of physical contact. Normally, she'd wake me by flicking my cheek with her tail or tickling my nose, and she'd always hold my hand in passing.

Was something wrong? Was it related to her heat? Whatever the case, I didn't have the nerve to test her further after what had just happened.

…No, wait. I could just win another round of rock-paper-scissors and ask her outright if I could touch her.

I couldn't let my curiosity go unanswered, no matter the consequences.

"…Uh, sorry. I'll be more careful in the future. Let's start again."

"Hey, you…! Ugh. Fine. That's just like you."

I felt a twinge of guilt seeing how off she seemed, but I had no intention of going easy on her. I always gave my all in any game, even against my kindergarten cousin.

Since I'd won the last round by faking her out, I decided to use the same trick again.

"Rock-paper-scissors."

Feigning scissors, I threw rock instead. But this time, she played with paper.

"I… I won!"

So the same trick didn't work twice, huh? Well, I'd made peace with answering whatever she wanted to ask, even if it was something extreme.

"…You win. So, what's your question, Hoyeon?"

“Well… then… do you… meet other girls because… I’m not enough for you…?”

My resolve wavered instantly. I could answer anything—but not questions tied to the original story or the future.

And yet, she’d gone straight for one of those exceptions. Her unexpected attack left me reeling.

“That’s… not it.”

I assured her firmly that meeting other girls had nothing to do with her being inadequate. I couldn’t risk any misunderstandings.

But that answer only seemed to upset her more. Her voice grew louder, and she pressed me harder.

“…Then why do you meet other girls?!”

Revealing the truth to her was out of the question. Telling her that this world was a novel and that I had to charm every single girl to reach a happy ending—namely, to deal with her mother somehow—was simply impossible.

To be honest, I wasn’t even sure if the so-called happy ending involved defeating Byeolbi. How could anyone possibly defeat a being capable of creating a moon in an instant and hurling it down to the ground?

In the original story, the depiction of her strength was terrifying. She wasn’t even fighting seriously, merely testing the waters and toying with the characters while gradually increasing her intensity.

“If I say it’s about building connections… Will you believe me?”

In the end, I had no choice but to come up with a pitiful excuse. It felt pathetic, but being honest would’ve been far worse. I had no better options.

“I… I’m a princess… so I’m just… not enough.”

“…But still, you’re the only one I’m this close to.”

“R-really? That’s nice… That’s good, but…”

I couldn’t help but feel like I’d set myself up for trouble with the rules of this game. If she had just hit me and ended it, at least my heart would’ve been at ease.

“…Should we stop here?”

I suggested ending the game as a draw, sensing that continuing would leave both of us hurt.

“You ask all your questions… and now you want to quit?”

Her tone carried a menacing edge, so I hastily denied it, but in doing so, I’d fallen right into her trap.

“Then… let’s keep going?”

Somehow, it felt like I had just poked a sleeping tiger awake.

– – – –

Gloria was currently in a coma, while Stefania had suffered irreparable injuries and disappeared after fleeing.

With the leaders of the major demon factions eliminated, the remaining apostles had disbanded the groups naturally.

Though the mastermind behind the beast attacks remained unknown, the Church considered the outcome a success, with minimal losses on their part.

But for Ethan, there was no good news to be found. All the credit for Stefania’s defeat went to Ena, while the hidden demons were hunted down by other apostles.

In essence, Ethan had achieved nothing of note, leaving his position precarious.

Some argued that his ability to sense demonic energy was no longer necessary, given the major demon force was eradicated. Others suggested studying his rare talent further for future applications.

It wasn't just his role as an apostle at stake; there was even a possibility he might be dissected to uncover the secret of his abilities. Ethan was acutely aware of the danger he was in.

Yet every incident was swiftly resolved by others, leaving him stranded at the academy with no opportunity to prove himself.

It was then that someone approached him.

Was it a noble here to mock him? Or had the Church finally decided what to do with him?

Through his sole remaining eye, Ethan saw not a noble nor a Church official, but an elf.

"…You're pursuing Hoyeon, aren't you?"

He froze at her words. The only connection he had with her was observing her from afar during prayer. Why would she bring this up?

"…How do you know that?"

The elf cut him off before he could press further, making him an offer he couldn't refuse.

"The spirits told me. I'll help you. Let's uncover Hoyeon's secret together!"

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 85

Chapter 85: Under Others' Gazes

It felt like a brawl. Although there were no flying fists, we struck each other relentlessly until one side was utterly tattered.

…To be honest, you might even remove the "brawl" part. This was a one-sided beatdown.

Perhaps it was my karmic debt for making Hoyeon this serious. She completely overwhelmed me without holding back.

"Dogeon. Dogeon? Who's the prettiest person in this academy?"

"It's obviously you."

"Isn't it? Then why do you keep trying to charm other girls? Seriously… I'm curious. Guess I'll have to find out. Rock, paper…"

Whether it was because she'd snapped during her "heat" or she was venting everything she'd bottled up, she strangled my spirit with a demeanor completely unlike her usual self.

Her eyes didn't glint with anger—it was more like something had unhinged within her. I had no clue how to stop her, and I feared where this would lead.

"Scissors, paper, rock!"

As if she'd seen through all my shallow tricks, she didn't let me win a single round after the first few.

Originally, I'd intended to play just a few rounds, send her back, and move on, but one foolish mistake brought us to this.

I should probably accept this as my karma. Maybe I should think of today as settling everything that's been building up.

She chose paper, and I picked rock. I had no idea what method she was using, but the game itself felt rigged. Judging by how she stared at my hand like she was about to tear it off, she seemed to be fully utilizing her sharp instincts.

"So… what exactly am I lacking? Strength? Height? Or is it my body? Influence? Huh? Hm?"

Even though I'd told her several times it wasn't her fault, it didn't reach her at all. Or perhaps she understood but was just venting her frustration.

If she were her usual quiet self, I might have noticed subtle differences in her demeanor. But now, she was rampaging like a wild beast, leaving no room for me to read her.

"…Like I said earlier, it's not that you're lacking. I'm sorry. I keep repeating myself."

"Then why do you keep flirting with others—no, girls! I only have you as my friend!"

We'd already had this exact conversation just moments ago. I cursed my inability to say anything but the same words over and over. If I revealed the truth, I'd probably be labeled 100% crazy, and she might leave me.

Let's just pretend I didn't hear her slip of the tongue just now. She was trying, but it seemed like she silently cursed every time I mentioned another girl.

“I’m sorry. Still, you’re the most precious person to me, and we’re closest. Please… believe that much.”

“Arghhh!”

She was about to use an iron claw on me but stopped abruptly, as if blocked by an invisible barrier. The strange noise she let out left me at a loss for words.

Why not just hit me outright? What was she even doing? But thinking about how I was the cause of her torment made it hard to feel entirely at ease.

I’d thought I could navigate her obsessive tendencies like balancing on a blade. Turns out, I’m about to be sliced in half.

Cutting ties with her wasn’t an option, so this balancing act was inevitable. Even accounting for her slightly unhinged state due to her "heat," her attention was already suffocating.

…I knew. A happy ending would be much simpler if I just left it all behind and lived happily ever after with Hoyeon.

The other characters were, essentially, strangers anyway.

But still.

If there was a way for everyone to be happy, and if I was the only one who could guide them to it, how could I turn my back on that?

I couldn’t.

At the very least, I wanted to try as far as I could.

“…Sigh. Enough. It’s almost lunchtime, so let’s stop here.”

This was the result. Even Hoyeon, whom I thought would be the easiest to handle, ended up angry with me.

There was no way a happy ending for everyone could be achieved easily. Even so, I hoped for such an ending.

Hoyeon stormed out of the room, not giving me any gesture to follow her. She slammed the door so hard that Yeonho, who had been sleeping soundly, jumped up in surprise.

Come to think of it, it was probably this little guy's mealtime too. After filling his bowl with a handful of food, I hurried after Hoyeon.

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Anastasia had one concern these days.

"What troubles you, my love?"

"I've told you not to call me that, Eric. There's no need to act when it's just the two of us. Just use my name."

Her fiancé was the reason. A childhood friend she'd known for years, Eric had been separated from her for a decade due to her circumstances. When they reunited at the academy, he had turned into a mountain of muscle.

Having seen everything about each other as children, Anastasia had never thought of him romantically. His appearance, far from her preferences, didn't help.

The cute boyishness of his youth had been replaced by a bulky frame. His bald head, paired with a meticulously groomed mustache, had left her in shock when they first met again.

"Well then, Anastasia. But since you address me formally, how could I ever speak casually to you, even when it's just us?"

Despite his rugged appearance, his overly polite demeanor was not the real issue.

Her biggest problem was that she was starting to see him as a man.

“That’s exactly it…”

“…? I’m afraid I don’t understand what’s troubling you.”

The problem was that he was utterly oblivious.

Anastasia had been the one to suggest they play along with her father’s plans and go their separate ways later. Having seen him at his worst, she couldn’t bring herself to confess first.

“…Do people often say you’re oblivious?”

“My mother often said, ‘You’re always dense at crucial moments,’ but I’d say I’ve grown quite perceptive recently.”

Why was this musclehead, so clueless, starting to seem attractive to her?

Anastasia’s worries only deepened. Still, even concerns need a full stomach, so they headed to the dining hall.

“Why didn’t you bring your entourage?”

Because of you. She swallowed her words and replied.

“Sometimes, I want some alone time… though you ruined that by showing up!”

“My apologies, and thank you for sharing such precious time with me.”

Did he even realize what he was saying? Anastasia doubted it.

“…Whatever, Eric.”

Knowing she’d only end up frustrated, Anastasia gave up and began filling her plate.

“Eating vegetables is good for you. To think you still have those picky eating habits…”

“B-Be quiet! And you’re one to talk with how much food you’re taking!”

“This much is appropriate for someone my size. Besides, I included vegetables too.”

Annoyed by Eric bringing up her childhood habits, Anastasia found her irritation quickly fading.

“…Huh? Aren’t those…”

Her eyes fell on Dogeon and Hoyeon. But the atmosphere around them was drastically different from what she knew.

Gone was the subtle connection between them. Instead, a frigid tension reminiscent of a northern blizzard swirled.

“Do you know them? They look like they’ve had a fight.”

“Quiet. Are you really that oblivious?”

“…Hmm. I’ll be more careful.”

Criticizing her utterly oblivious fiancé, Anastasia cautiously observed the pair.

The frosty air was emanating from Hoyeon, while Dogeon, seemingly guilt-ridden, silently accepted it.

So, Dogeon’s done something terrible to her again. Anastasia could tell immediately. She guessed it might have something to do with him meeting her without saying anything to Hoyeon first.

Though the suspicious duo tailing them was a bit concerning, Anastasia decided to let it slide.

Even I, as a grand duchess, have people secretly following me—how much worse must it be for a princess like her?

Resuming her observations, Anastasia noticed something else peculiar.

The two weren’t speaking a single word to each other. They simply focused on clearing their plates in silence.

It was a stark contrast to the usual scene of them chatting away whenever she saw them in the dining hall. Anastasia once again tried to gauge just how big of a mistake Dogeon had made.

But she couldn’t even begin to fathom what he might have done to make someone like Hoyeon refuse to speak a single word to him.

She resolved to visit Hoyeon later and offer her sympathy.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 86

Chapter 86: Something That Might Be a Confession

“Are you certain?”

Ethan stared into the void as he questioned Cecilia. She hesitated, clearly trying to avoid answering, but under his sharp gaze, she eventually stammered a response.

“…W-Well… the spirit definitely said it was here… somewhere…”

Listening to her, Ethan turned his gaze forward again. The space ahead marked the ambiguous boundary between the academy and the mountains —a blend of civilization and nature.

But no matter where he looked, he couldn’t find any sign of what they were seeking.

“If the spirit says it’s there, then it’s there. Is there anything else, Cecilia?”

“U-Um, it’s not definitive, but… the World Tree… the World Tree? Anyway, I’m getting a reaction from the World Tree, as well as from them. They’re definitely in front of us. Though, why the World Tree would be here, I have no idea…”

The World Tree.

As far as Ethan knew, the World Tree could not grow outside the great forests of the elves. It was an enormous tree, far larger and thicker than

most buildings. Certainly not something you'd find among the ordinary trees on a hillside.

Whether it was a barrier or some kind of manipulation, all Ethan could see swirling in front of him was a fierce energy, ungraspable and alien.

The swirling force seemed to block any approach, pulsating with something akin to both magical energy and demonic aura.

"There's definitely something there, but I can't tell if it's the World Tree. It's not like it suddenly sank into the ground or flew into the sky, so I'm sure it's 'there.' But we can't get to it—something's in the way."

"That's what I've been saying! There's something in front of us… Wait, you're saying we can't go there? Not that you can't see it…?"

Cecilia tilted her head, forming question marks with her little spirits as she questioned Ethan. From her perspective, the path forward seemed clear and accessible.

"Yes. Can't you see it? That swirling energy over there. I thought an elf like you would be able to see it."

Her pride clearly stung, Cecilia immediately changed her tone and responded defensively.

"W-Who said I couldn't see it?! I-I just didn't mention it because… I thought you wouldn't understand!"

"You should've told me anyway. If it were something dangerous, I'd have walked straight into it."

"Th-That's true… I'll make sure to tell you next time. But listen, if that… whatever it is, originates from the World Tree, then we don't need to worry. After all, the World Tree has one of its children right here!"

Maybe I chose the wrong partner. Ethan briefly entertained the thought but quickly brushed it aside.

He reminded himself to be grateful for her. Despite her unreliable moments, she was an elf who could command spirits—a priceless ally for someone like him, who had lost nearly all his support from the Church and his prearranged collaborators.

As Cecilia closed her eyes, seemingly communicating with something beyond the barrier, Ethan decided not to wait passively.

“Well, anyway, let’s figure out if it’s safe first.”

He picked up a beetle crawling nearby and hurled it toward the vortex.

The beetle flew through the air—and vanished without a trace.

“A wave of… rejection? Why is it… rejecting me?”

Watching the beetle disappear, and hearing Cecilia’s murmurs, Ethan pieced together the situation and sighed inwardly.

So much for going in there.

If they tried to force their way in, they’d likely be erased just like the beetle. That much seemed clear to him.

But Cecilia, apparently thinking something else, began walking slowly toward the vortex.

“That can’t be right… Something must be wrong. Let me check it out!”

The rejection seemed to have deeply shaken her. Denying the reality before her, she moved closer to the swirling force.

“Stop!”

Just before she touched it, Ethan yanked her back. Thankfully, only the edge of her sleeve was shredded by the vortex—it could have been far worse.

“…This doesn’t make sense…”

But her mind remained in turmoil.

Why would the World Tree, the creator of elves, reject its own child?

Having her spirit taken away, and now being denied by the World Tree she thought would always embrace her, shattered her understanding of the world.

“It doesn’t make sense. The Church has abandoned me, the academy is under attack from demons, and an enigmatic princess from the East has shown up. Are you going to give up because of all that?”

The word “give up” snapped her out of her spiral. How could she, as the protector of others, allow herself to be the one needing protection?

“…No. I won’t. Even if none of it makes sense… the Goddess would want me to uncover the truth of it all.”

“Doubt, think, and uncover it. That’s right. But for now, we need to retreat. It doesn’t look like we can do anything on our own.”

Humbled, Cecilia quietly followed Ethan’s lead. Even her spirits seemed to sense that entering the vortex would result in complete annihilation.

“…This is going to take a while, isn’t it?”

“It was never going to be quick.”

Sharing the same determination, they gave up their pursuit for the time being.

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Feeling both upset and suffocated, I escaped to the shelter I hadn’t visited in a while. The grand tree still stood in its place, exuding its majestic presence.

And fresh magical energy, too.

Finally, I could catch my breath and cool my overheated mind. This gave me a chance to think over what Dogeon had said.

I understood. Even as the protagonist, he was still just a commoner with no backing. Of course, he'd want to build as many connections as possible.

One friend is good, but two are better. One diamond-tier ally is nice, but two are better.

If I weren't so caught up in my personality, I'd have surrounded myself with people who could enrich my life, too. I could understand that logically.

But my heart refused to accept it. It grumbled in defiance.

I'm aware it's an ugly desire, but I can't bring myself to let Dogeon go. He's the only person here with whom I can truly feel at ease.

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that he saw me as merely friend number one. Sure, I knew he cared about me, valued me more than anyone else, and wanted the best for me.

But somehow, that still felt insufficient.

…If I went just a little further—could I tie him to my side completely? Not as a friend, or even a best friend, but something else, even if it was just in name…

"You were here."

Just as my thoughts were about to take an inappropriate turn, Dogeon, who had belatedly followed me, interrupted them. I hated being like this during the heat.

I wanted to live with my mind blissfully empty, like usual, but this time, it wouldn't stop churning. I hated overthinking, especially since every conclusion I reached was bound to fail anyway.

"…Hmph."

Even if I understood things logically, humans aren't creatures that move based on logic alone. Still, I didn't intend to stay completely silent, as I had earlier.

I made sure to let him know I was angry, just enough to get the point across.

"…"

"…"

The problem was, my approach worked a little too well—this time, Dogeon was the one sitting in silence, looking like a mute with his lips sealed shut.

He was the one in the wrong, so why was I the one feeling uncomfortable?

I felt like I always ended up in this position. And even if I tried to push back, I knew I'd lose in the end. An introvert can't beat an extrovert.

Look at him now, casually sitting beside me as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

In the end, it's always the introvert who loses. Even though I knew speaking first meant losing, I couldn't help myself.

"…Don't you have anything to say?"

Specifically, I was hoping for something like, I only have you—I care about you the most, and from now on, I'll only look at you. Not an apology.

"Well… I'm not really sure what to say."

Not sure what to say? Fine, I'll just tell you. Just say, You're the most precious person to me.

"…You already know why I'm angry, don't you? So, let me ask you one thing. No matter how ridiculous I sound, will you believe me?"

The atmosphere suddenly shifted, as if he were about to confess something. What is he stalling for now? If it's another excuse, I won't let it slide.

“…Go on. I’ll listen.”

“When it comes to meeting other people… I want you to know there’s a reason I have to do it. But you’re the most important person to me. I might even… like you.”

W-What? Like me?

“So, I’ll be clear about this. Once everything is over, I’ll only look at you. Just hold on until then… Can you do that?”

Wait, what? This is moving way too fast.

I just got hit with a confession—or whatever this is—and then told, Even if I flirt with other people, I’ll come back to you in the end.

…How am I supposed to react to this?

“…Are you seriously, truly saying this?”

I asked, putting a lot of meaning behind my words. I wanted to know if he really expected me to believe him, and—

If he really liked me.

“…I’m sorry. Even though I know it sounds absurd. But I mean it.”

At this rate, I…

…I might not be able to hold myself back.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 87

Chapter 87: Distortion

“Sorry. I know it sounds utterly ridiculous, even to me. But I’m serious.”

I knew. His heartbeat and voice carried no tremors, only sincerity. Even when I looked into his eyes, there wasn’t a hint of hesitation—they were unwavering and firm.

“So, I’ll say this clearly. Once everything is over, I’ll only look at you. Just wait until then… Can you do that?”

I wasn’t sure what he wanted me to endure. My possessiveness? Or perhaps this dark, boiling feeling in my chest? Was he asking for a bit of freedom?

I didn’t like it… but since he was making this promise himself, I could afford to be generous. If I couldn’t even handle this, then what kind of friend would I be?

“…You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Listening to Dogeon’s words quietly, I could tell he genuinely meant what he was saying.

It wasn’t because he disliked me or found me lacking—he was tied to others by circumstances he couldn’t control. Of course, I could sense a bit of personal interest mixed in, but that was tolerable.

It was irritating, but considering the undeniable charm of some of the others, I could begrudgingly let it slide.

“Fine. I’ll endure it. You are my closest friend, after all. But…”

I moved slowly toward Dogeon.

“Do you trust me?”

I trusted Dogeon. As long as he didn’t betray me first.

But if—just if—he showed any sign of getting attached to another girl…

Yeah. I don’t even know what I’d do.

“Whatever it is that’s supposed to end, I don’t know. But when it’s over… you’d better cut ties with all the others, got it?”

Then, I gripped his shoulder hard enough to make him wince, as if marking him with my claim for all to see.

Dogeon groaned in pain, but he’d be fine. That black mist of his would take care of it. Right now, I needed to make something clear to him.

In the end, you belong to me. Like a boomerang, you’ll always come back to me. Because you like me.

Your warmth, your expressions, your scent—they’ll all be mine eventually.

“Hoyeon…! I think my shoulder’s going to break. Let go!”

Yes. I’ll be the only one to see you like this—grimacing in pain. No other woman will ever witness this. Only I’ll get to enjoy it.

“If you don’t cut ties properly and do something weird… I’ll get angry, okay?”

Smiling brightly, I showed all my teeth as I spoke to Dogeon.

“Alright, alright! Just let go, please…!”

Oh, right. I was still holding on. He's acting like he's fragile, but for someone who boasts about being indestructible, he sure knows how to whine at times like this.

Still, even with reinforcement, humans really are weak. Feeling his breath so close, the thought of biting his neck flickered through my mind.

…Wait. What am I even thinking?

"Oh, sorry…!"

What am I doing to my precious friend? I even swore I wouldn't mess with him today, so why did I just break that promise?

Is this because of heat? But it's never been like this before. I couldn't pinpoint why I was acting so differently, and it left me utterly confused.

As Dogeon rotated his shoulder cautiously, likely checking for injuries, I wondered how I should apologize for what I'd done. But no good ideas came to mind.

I wasn't in my right mind, sure, but I almost crushed my only friend's shoulder…!

"Are… Are you okay?!"

I vaguely recalled gripping him hard enough to nearly break him. While I'm not overwhelmingly strong, I could still easily crush an average human, which made me worry.

"…Yeah. I think so. Nothing's broken, at least."

Dogeon kept his distance from me, probably because of what just happened. Ugh. I should've held back. Why couldn't I hold out for just a moment longer?

It felt like I'd ruined any chance of things going smoothly. Dogeon didn't seem inclined to say much more either.

I had nothing to say to myself. I already promised to trust him, and he'd said everything he needed to.

"…Just in case, you should… visit the infirmary. Humans' bodies are fragile, after all."

Yeah. Unlike us, they can't just recover by lying around and eating a bit of meat. If he had some invisible injury, that would be a disaster.

"Okay… I'll go, then."

I couldn't bring myself to stop Dogeon as he awkwardly shuffled away. Even though I knew he was likely heading off to meet another girl.

…Ugh. Why am I like this?

The fresh air that had calmed me down earlier now sank me back into despair. Left alone and unwilling to meditate, I decided to follow Dogeon.

I suddenly remembered I had something else to ask Big Brother Black Wolf. I should head back to my room.

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I thought there was no point in hiding anymore, so I decided to come clean with Hoyeon and confront her with my sincerity.

Her reaction, though, was completely unexpected. Sure, I figured she'd say something cutting, or maybe grumble a little.

But gripping my shoulder so hard I thought it would shatter? That wasn't in the forecast. Neither was the look on her face.

Her wide eyes, her bared fangs—she looked as if she wanted to sever all ties with every other heroine, yet would tolerate my request just until the end.

…It was terrifying. Not the kind of pressure that came from intimidation, but something else entirely. Her gaze wasn't that of a person—it was like

she was claiming her property.

Still… she'd granted me permission, right? So, I wouldn't have to tread as carefully around her now… right?

Holding onto that faint hope, I quietly made my way to the infirmary. My shoulder had either cracked or, at the very least, was badly bruised.

"Hey, Dogeon! Nice to see you! What brings you here?"

"You're…"

And then, I ran into people I didn't expect to see.

"Exi. And… Camilla. I didn't think I'd run into you two here. My shoulder's been stiff since yesterday, so I thought I'd get some medicine… And I think I know why you're here, Exi. Did you fall?"

Her clothes were covered in dirt, her knees scraped and bleeding. Judging by how Camilla, standing next to her, didn't seem alarmed, it wasn't from being hit but from rolling down somewhere—a spectacular tumble, it seemed.

"Oh! How did you know?!"

I was about to say, It's a basic deduction, but Camilla's sharp glare stopped me. I only said, There are ways to tell, and left it at that.

Exipri darted into the infirmary, leaving just Camilla and me behind.

Even though she'd been avoiding me, claiming she was busy, I could tell she'd been deliberately keeping her distance.

"…Can I ask why you're avoiding me?"

I wasn't particularly fond of her, and she likely felt the same, but a heroine was still a heroine. If there was a misunderstanding, I wanted to clear it up, so I spoke first.

“I’d like to ask the opposite—why are you so persistent?”

It seemed I’d firmly landed on her bad side. Rather than answering my question, she snapped back, practically telling me to buzz off.

But I couldn’t do that. I’d nearly wrecked my shoulder just to keep things moving along.

“…I wanted to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to discuss with you. If you want a conversation, why not have it with that princess holding your leash?”

That shut me up. Now that I thought about it, the rumor about me being close to Hoyeon had already spread everywhere. Trying to build connections with other heroines in such circumstances was bound to be difficult.

Even though Hoyeon and I weren’t officially dating, someone like Anastasia would definitely get angry, saying, Are you cheating on Hoyeon right now?

…It was all just for the events, but still. All that was left were the final exams and the school trip—could I make progress with just those two?

Would the heroines even accept me? My confidence was crumbling.

“Hah. You think you can coast because you’re good-looking? Keep pushing your luck, and it’ll blow up in your face. This is the last ounce of kindness you’ll get from me, so remember that.”

With Camilla’s sharp words on top of everything, a happy ending felt farther away than ever.

The one legitimate reason I had to ask for her help—Stephanie—might as well be a lost cause. With the way things were going, any future events with Camilla were as good as gone.

…How did things spiral this far out of control already?

“…Thanks for the advice.”

After that, Camilla didn’t react to me anymore. She applied bandages to her knees and ointment to her face, smiling brightly, though it somehow felt different.

It seemed even she might be struggling now.

Was clinging to Hoyeon the right answer after all? Was I arrogant to think I could lead this world to a happy ending?

But the situation wasn’t over yet. I couldn’t move forward or back.

…Ugh.

“Dogeon, was it? Conduct yourself wisely. You may not be as prominent as Hoyeon, but there’s plenty of talk about you as well. Consider this an apology for ignoring your earlier attempts to call me—don’t get the wrong idea.”

With that parting remark, Camilla left. As I watched her walk away, I couldn’t help but think she wasn’t inherently a bad person.

If things had gone by the book, she could have been a proper heroine. But Hoyeon’s presence had tangled everything up.

It left me with a lot to think about.

Was achieving a happy ending truly impossible?

I wanted to dismiss the thought as unnecessary anxiety, but I couldn’t anymore.

Even as I received my medicine, I couldn’t envision any future plans.

Now… I really didn’t know what to do.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 88

Chapter 88: Preparing for Finals

“…Elder, how many does that make?”

“Past 270… I stopped counting.”

Black Wolf gazed at the seemingly endless swarm of evildoers, internally reeling in disbelief.

Is this the result of the free will our tribe fought so hard to preserve?

He had volunteered to serve as Hoyeon’s guard upon hearing Byeolbi’s claim that the continent she was headed to was a land of free will.

By his estimate, he had cut down over 300 people, yet the evil rooted in the city showed no signs of disappearing. Doubts began creeping into his mind.

Could this, too, be one of Byeolbi’s cruel pranks? He wondered if he was still trapped in that narrow cage, his mind twisted by her influence. Just as he reached the height of his suspicions, he caught the sound of rustling in the distance.

“So stubborn. Lieutenant, can I leave that one to you?”

“Leave it to me, sir. Should I dispose of the body like last time?”

“Yeah. Return it to the earth.”

The unsettling exchange caused the rustling sound to grow louder, but to the disturbed Black Wolf, it was a trivial matter.

Was Byeolbi's claim true after all? That free will was still far beyond these people's grasp?

In the past, he would have flatly denied it, but now, he was shaken.

When he returned to his quarters, a falcon awaited him.

Perched idly by the window, the bird's presence puzzled him until he noticed the piece of paper tied to its leg.

Who would send this? He pondered, though only one person came to mind. Yet he dismissed the thought just as quickly.

That person would never initiate contact first.

Just in case, he checked the note, fearing it might be a threat from some criminal organization that had tracked down his whereabouts. However, the familiar handwriting left him momentarily stunned, and the content made him doubt his eyes.

"Please watch over Dogeon."

Hoyeon, who rarely reached out to anyone, was asking him to monitor someone. Black Wolf couldn't help but suspect another one of Byeolbi's tricks.

More unbelievable than the consequences of free will was the fact that Hoyeon had made such a request. Her timid nature and reserved personality made the idea of her asking someone to spy on another person seem ludicrous.

Only after banging his head against the wall—leaving a visible crack—did he accept it as reality.

"…Well, the young lady is really fixated, isn't she? To the point of ordering surveillance… Ha. I never thought I'd see the day. Should I report this to

the higher-ups?”

Clutching his aching head, Black Wolf glanced toward the academy. Its security was strict on the surface, but his trained eyes saw countless flaws in its defenses.

Even someone like Hoyeon changes when there’s someone by her side, huh.

Briefly recalling his tribe, he shook his head, dispelling the thought, and headed for the academy.

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True to her word, Hoyeon didn’t smother me with obsessive behavior after that day. She didn’t cling to me throughout the day or growl murderously whenever I glanced at another girl.

Of course, it wasn’t like those tendencies had disappeared completely. She still sniffed me in the evenings, muttering incomprehensible words like “grass,” “perfume,” “sweetness,” “sweat,” and “coward,” while flashing unsettling smiles. At least I could tell she was holding back.

I even managed to sleep better after confirming that my paranoia about being followed was just that—paranoia.

However, as for progress with others… there wasn’t any. Shockingly.

Anastasia was kind to me but maintained an invisible boundary that I couldn’t cross. Iris was similar; though her complexion had improved and she’d gained some fullness in her chest, she didn’t seem thrilled about getting closer to me.

Her responses carried just enough courtesy to avoid making me feel awkward, but they lacked warmth.

Camilla? Multiple attempts to approach her ended with curt rejections.

Even Exipri, who seemed to warm up after I offered her some candy, was stopped by Camilla, who warned her not to eat sweets from others. That

plan went up in flames.

Cecilia was the only one who actively talked to me, but Ethan was always by her side. And her tone felt less friendly and more interrogative, as if she were conducting an investigation.

Taking stock of the situation, it was clear things hadn't improved at all. In fact, my relationship with Camilla had worsened.

As for Gloria, rumors had it that she was bedridden. Nothing was going my way.

What should I do? I was starting to feel anxious. The original story was already shattered when Stefania, the root cause of the first arc's events, disappeared.

I couldn't even think about the invasion in the second part of the story when I didn't know what might happen during the upcoming finals.

I'd been diligently visiting Georg every week to train, but honestly, I wasn't sure if it was even necessary anymore.

Was it worth building strength now that the threats seemed to have disappeared?

Three Weeks Before Finals

"…No, Hoyeon! I swear I haven't forgotten this time!"

"But she said you'd already learned this. My love, forgive me, but… it seems like you did forget. Am I wrong?"

When I first met the guy who called Anastasia "my love," I was startled. But after hearing their circumstances, I quickly understood.

It's a fantasy world, after all. Arranged engagements without mutual consent still happen.

Eric didn't seem romantically interested in her, and Anastasia, while hard to read, appeared ready to break it off.

Their act of drawing boundaries made sense since they were only pretending to be engaged for appearances.

"Would you please just be quiet?!"

Hoyeon had organized another study group in preparation for the finals. The difference this time was how much bigger and noisier the group had become.

"If you want to flaunt how close you are, save it for after class. Anastasia, I believe I told you not to forget logarithms."

"Th-that's… I mean… I just… Ugh! Why do we even have to learn something we'll never use in real life?!"

"Because you need to graduate, of course. Do you want to repeat the year?"

"Ugh… Anything but that…! Ugh, are all these formulas just a conspiracy by wizards to make our lives miserable?!"

"It's not to make your life miserable; it's for the advancement of technology. Now stop whining. I never thought I'd have to explain this again…"

"Don't worry, my love. I'll help you understand it, too."

"…Aaaagh!!!"

Hoyeon seemed much more adept at handling people now. She even had a commanding presence that made her look like a seasoned teacher.

"…How about solving it this way, Ethan?"

"Not bad, Cecil. But this method works better for me. My brain doesn't function unless I write out the formula."

“Hmm… Well, if that’s the case, then… Let’s try this approach instead…”

The finals loomed closer, but my progress? Still nonexistent.

Even back then, Ethan had been solving problems effortlessly on his own, but now he had brought Cecilia along for self-study sessions. I wasn’t sure why they were together, but when I asked, they both claimed it was for the sake of exploring a shared research topic. Suspicious, but I had no choice but to let it go.

Somehow, I felt like all the heroines were drifting away from me and toward Hoyeon. It filled me with a sense of crisis, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

Cecilia’s spirit still seemed to be intact, and the demonic beasts that were supposed to trigger an event with Anastasia had appeared once during midterms and never again.

My relationships with Camilla and Exipri had been strained since the start of the semester.

Sigh.

“…Eric. I’ll leave the rest of the explanation to you.”

“Don’t worry, Lady Hoyeon. I’ll take full responsibility for teaching my love.”

The other side was lively. With so many people around, Hoyeon’s one-on-one, in-depth lessons were clearly no longer possible. She seemed busy managing everyone.

“You look lonely. Shall I be your partner?”

“…If you would, I’d be grateful.”

With everyone else seemingly paired off, Hoyeon joining me would at least help dispel this strange sense of defeat I felt.

“Alright. Today… grass, sweat, coward, perfume. You’ve been busy, haven’t you?”

“Uh, Lady Hoyeon… what exactly do ‘grass,’ ‘sweat,’ and all that mean?”

As usual, she muttered those words while sniffing me, and my curiosity finally got the better of me. Why did she always whisper such seemingly random things whenever she caught my scent?

“…It’s nothing. I’m just describing the smells I pick up from you.”

Hoyeon gave me an ambiguous answer, one that felt both revealing and inscrutable. Then, like before, she began pointing out the specific parts of my work where I was stuck, helping me with precision.

…But here’s the thing.

She’s sitting awfully close to me. Almost too close.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 89

Chapter 89: Boasting

A month and a half. It was long, but not an eternity. Dogeon didn't stick to me like glue every day, but he came by at least once a day, and Black Wolf kept me updated in real-time about what Dogeon was up to.

So, there wasn't much of a problem. Dogeon didn't seem to be making much progress, either. Even I could tell he'd been hitting a dead end so far.

Anya seemed to have feelings for either Eric or Arin, and the Church folk, while saying nothing outright, had some sort of vibe going on.

I didn't like how they trailed after us like ducklings, but Uncle Lieutenant was keeping them in check, so it wasn't something to worry too much about.

Hmm. From my perspective, knowing there's no room to interfere in a relationship, Dogeon's actions were doomed to fail in the end.

Not that it's because, in my previous life, whenever I left the house, I'd avoid PDA couples laughing arm-in-arm on the streets by awkwardly stepping onto the road instead of mustering up the courage to ask them to make way.

I wish Dogeon would see me in that light. Of course, if I blatantly said something like "Have my baby"─he'd probably freak out and run for the hills.

I just wish… at the very least, that he'd recognize me as a woman.

“…Uh, Hoyeon.”

“Hmm? What is it? Speak. Did you not understand my explanation?”

Had my explanation been too difficult for Dogeon, who traded brainpower for social skills? Given how often he’d asked questions when I tutored him during midterms, it was a reasonable suspicion.

“Well… I feel like you’re a bit too close. Would you mind stepping back a little?”

“What nonsense are you spouting? Where’s the confidence you had when you were hitting on Anya and Cecilia? Or is it just that you don’t like me?”

Based on what I’d seen through the window or heard from Black Wolf, Dogeon kept about the same distance with other girls as he was with me now.

Apparently, he even got slapped by Camilla once for getting too close.

Of course, I thought we were already closer than that since we’d actually made physical contact, but we’d been growing more distant lately.

That’s why we needed to get closer again. Even if only for a moment.

“Well, that’s…”

How did he know? Or why was he bringing it up now? Whatever he was about to say, it was probably something along those lines.

“I’m saying I’ll turn a blind eye, not that I won’t be watching. You’re aware of that, right? At least try to understand how it feels for me to have only been able to watch all this time.”

I whispered softly into Dogeon’s ear, careful not to disturb the other students, who were busy studying. I made sure to maintain a steady gaze, subtly applying pressure.

By now, it seemed Dogeon had nothing more to say, as he obediently turned his attention back to my lesson.

“Alright, moving on with the explanation…”

If he’d kept pushing, I was ready to bring up how many times he’d met with the other girls and then demand to know why he was treating me, who’d outright confessed, so coldly.

But as expected of someone who’d invested in social skills, his instincts were sharp. I couldn’t understand why someone so perceptive made such disappointing decisions when it mattered most.

Still, Dogeon wasn’t just good at communication; he also quickly grasped even the more difficult parts of the lesson.

“You solve equations of circles like this. Any questions?”

“No, none.”

Did that pseudo-magic of his boost intelligence as well? It might even be better than the intelligence-enhancing elixirs scholars took back in my hometown.

Those potions made anyone who drank them complain of headaches and take a week off work. They did make you smarter, though—I knew that from experience.

It was like… an awakening, a whole new perspective on the world.

But that wasn’t important right now.

“Alright, let’s take a ten-minute break.”

Having finished teaching Dogeon, and with Anya seemingly recalling the logarithms she’d been struggling with, I figured it was time for a break.

The moment I announced the break, Anya shot up from her seat and headed outside, as Eric trailed after her, telling her to wait.

“You’re not going outside?”

Even the Church folk were wandering out, but Dogeon just sat slumped in his chair, looking utterly drained, which made me curious.

“…I just don’t feel like it. Nothing’s been going right lately… I don’t know.”

With most people gone, the only one left nearby besides us was a homunculus librarian. Feeling relaxed, I decided to drop the formality in my speech.

“…Not going well?”

Seeing Dogeon openly admit that his romantic endeavors weren’t going well was a relief, but that didn’t mean I enjoyed seeing him so dejected.

After all, he’d spoken to me so confidently about his intentions—of course he’d feel embarrassed or down if things weren’t working out.

Not that I wasn’t pleased by the news. To begin with, chasing after people who already had feelings for someone else or none for you at all was exhausting for both sides.

I wished he’d just give up. But judging by his attitude, it didn’t seem like he was ready to throw in the towel yet.

“…Yeah. Sorry about that. After all that big talk, this is a pitiful result.”

No, if anything had come of it, I’d be even angrier. Honestly, I felt relieved at his failure. Why not give up and come to me instead?

That’d be a welcome development.

“…Well, it seems like things aren’t going well for you. I can’t exactly tell you to cheer up, but if it ever gets too hard… you can come to me. I’ll help if I can.”

Just not with relationship advice. Honestly, I wanted to tell him to give it up and come to me, but I didn't want to crush his spirit.

With anyone else, maybe—but I wanted to respect my friend's courage.

"Thanks. So… Can I ask you one thing?"

"Of course… What is it?"

Hmm. I hadn't expected him to ask something right away, but since I'd offered, I wasn't going to back out like a coward.

"…If you suddenly had to go somewhere, but all the roads to get there were blocked, what would you do?"

His tone grew serious, and his voice dropped. I thought he was about to say something heavy, but that's what he came out with?

"What do you mean? I just wouldn't go, I guess."

"But if not going meant something terrible would happen to everyone… Would you still ignore it? What if I was the only one who could stop it?"

The conversation was getting complicated and dark. Still, I felt I had to answer sincerely.

I sat down next to him and gave him my answer.

"…If that's the case, I'd try to find a way first. But if there really isn't any way to get there… wouldn't it be enough to be satisfied with that? You've already done your best."

If you've done all you can and it still doesn't work out, then you just have to chalk it up to bad luck and let it go. What else can you do?

Just like how, in my previous life, I couldn't make friends no matter how much I tried. Effort can achieve a lot of things, but there are definitely limits—some things are just impossible.

“…Alright, then I’ll add just one more condition. Let’s say that even if disaster befalls everyone, there’s a place where you can be safe. A place where no one would even know you ran away. Would you go there?”

As Dogeon said this, his face looked like that of an old man weighed down with anguish. Was this some kind of protagonist dilemma?

I couldn’t remember the original story very well—if anything, I hadn’t even finished reading it—but even in the little I’d seen, there were hints of a lurking darkness.

Maybe this continent had its own hidden shadows, too. Judging by how tormented he looked, he might be caught up in something like that.

The question seemed to boil down to this: “If you had the means to save everyone—or at least someone—but there was also a way for you to live comfortably, would you still choose the hard path to save others?”

It wasn’t something I could easily answer.

Philosophical dilemmas like this were already overwhelming when I was stuck grappling with ones my mother had left me. I still hadn’t solved the question of whether humans could live without gods.

“…I’m not sure. But, whatever choice you make, I’ll be on your side. As long as you keep your promises.”

In the end, all I could offer was blind empathy. Usually, when people ask these kinds of questions, they already have an answer in mind.

They just don’t feel confident about it yet, so they ask someone else.

I moved behind Dogeon and gently placed a hand on his shoulder.

I could feel him flinch for a moment, likely remembering what I’d done before, but then he seemed to realize I wasn’t applying any force, and his body relaxed.

This time, I wasn't going to crush his shoulder. As if to make that clear, I softly patted it.

And then, I hugged him from behind. Warmly.

"…Hoyeon?"

"Don't try to do everything alone. We're friends, aren't we? If things get tough, tell me. I don't know if I can actually help… but I can at least comfort you."

I wasn't sure if this was something friends normally did… but oh well. If this helped us grow closer, then why not?

Besides, Dogeon had been running himself ragged lately. Someone needed to give him a reward.

I held him silently for a while, and he stayed quiet as well, letting me embrace him.

It was warm—the warmth of another person's body. I'd felt it often from my parents when I was little, but as I grew up, it became a distant memory.

Thinking about it now, I realized there hadn't been anyone to share their warmth with me for a long time. Maybe that's why Dogeon felt special.

…But, because I stayed like that for too long, ten minutes had already passed.

Which meant the others came back in and saw exactly what we were doing.

So, instead of being embarrassed, I tightened my arms around Dogeon a little, as if to show off.

I made it clear to everyone watching: This is mine.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 90

Chapter 90: Descent

It was the 35th day since Black Wolf began monitoring Dogeon.

byeolbi had personally ordered, "Do not interfere unless my daughter's life is in danger." However, Black Wolf considered his actions to be a form of "protection" rather than interference, and thus, he diligently roamed the shadows of the academy as per Hoyeon's instructions.

Yet, a few questions lingered in his mind. Why was she so fixated on such a nobody, ignoring all the other remarkable individuals around her?

In terms of individual strength or the size of any group he could mobilize, Dogeon was at best mediocre. So why was the daughter of a monster paying attention to someone like him?

She, who was born between something near-omnipotent from beyond the stars and a man who could rightly be called the favored martial god of that being.

'…No, perhaps that's precisely why it's incomprehensible.'

How could one hope to understand something outside the bounds of logic and reason? To him, Hoyeon was just such an existence. Though she was cute, beautiful, and harmless, her very nature was fundamentally different.

Having watched over her since she was an infant, he thought this even more so. Before the age of five, she had been so alien that he had considered her a smaller version of byeolbi.

She didn’t cry, didn’t laugh, didn’t even whimper. Her inorganic reactions were so unlike those of a normal child that even he, who had been through countless battles, had felt a chill.

Sometimes, she would suddenly vanish from right in front of him, only to appear perched above his head. How she did it, he had no idea.

It wasn’t until she turned five, after byeolbi performed some mysterious act on her, that Hoyeon became the person he knew today. Still, he hadn’t forgotten the being she used to be—something that felt more like a creature than a child.

Black Wolf shook off his stray thoughts and refocused on his surveillance. After all, he knew better than anyone what happened to those who tried to understand such things.

'…Still, what is that boy’s deal?'

The story about Dogeon’s parents was clearly a lie.

In the East, humans were either preserved as exhibits in a corner of a zoo or kept alive only in byeolbi’s private domain. Even if someone miraculously escaped and byeolbi tolerated it, there were no ships heading west that they could hitch a ride on.

Thus, he had assumed Dogeon to be the child of a merchant who had visited the East, but even that wasn’t certain.

The boy didn’t meet with anyone other than fellow academy students, and any background checks turned up nothing, as if he had been hastily fabricated out of thin air.

“…Sigh. Why is Her Highness so smitten with someone like him?”

Knowing that thinking about it further would only be detrimental to himself, Black Wolf decided to let his imagination run wild instead.

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Fidgeting with the green orb in my pocket, I tried to pass the time.

Preparing problems suited to Anya's sieve-like brain while also creating assignments for the Church folks, who worked just fine without me, had been a headache. Still, I managed to finish it all within an hour.

I'd even written out the material for today's lesson with Dogeon the moment the session ended… leaving me with nothing to do.

This was how most days went. Whenever I showed my face, Dogeon would stiffen his tail like a wary cat, but after spending about an hour together, that would be the end of it.

I had even stolen a few of his unworn clothes from his room just to sniff them. But doing so only reminded me of his absence.

I'd read so many books in the library's literature section that it was faster to count the ones I hadn't read. I didn't feel like going back there.

Besides, after making such grand declarations to my mother about why I had to go west, it felt too pathetic to just hole up inside reading books all the time.

Since I felt like wandering around the academy today—maybe even finding places to visit with Dogeon later—I decided to prepare myself for getting lost and just explore.

…If only those Church people weren't tailing me, it would've been perfect.

Lately, they didn't even bother trying to hide their presence. Gold Sun was like that from the beginning, but…

What did I ever do to that elf to deserve being followed?

…Well, there was that one thing, but I fixed it and returned it to him, didn't I? No harm done.

Seriously, why were they following me? I couldn't understand it. Isn't it enough that it ended well? Why cling so obsessively to the process?

Ugh. I hate this. Getting marked by such a gloomy person… What rotten luck.

"…Cecilia, are you sure the concealment barrier is working?"

"Don't worry. It's a special one, combining spirit magic and my own knowledge. It even muffles sounds…"

I could see and hear everything, though. Not that I felt like pointing it out. She sounded so confident and self-assured—it felt cruel to burst her bubble.

Besides, I couldn't help but think, Isn't this how the townsfolk must've felt watching the Emperor in "The Emperor's New Clothes"? It was kind of funny.

Since I wasn't planning anything particularly important, having them tag along as travel companions didn't seem too bad.

…Just not as companions for my journey to the afterlife. That phrasing came out weird.

"…Sigh. Dogeon's probably rolling around with some other girl again…"

He seemed especially determined to win over Camilla these days. But was it really okay to keep pursuing someone who had already told him to get lost, both physically and verbally?

No matter how charming or magnetic his personality might be, that only worked on people who hadn't put up their A.T. Fields.

If someone was rejecting him outright, it was a waste of time at best.

It reminded me of the MT trip. I pushed away people who came to me and waved goodbye to those who left. Dealing with people was just exhausting.

These days, if someone asked for help, I'd probably offer it, but thinking about it now, I realized I wasn't quite the same person I used to be.

Well, my gender and even my species had changed—how could my mind remain the same?

Lost in these trivial thoughts, I wandered the academy with my two ridiculous companions until, as expected, I got completely lost.

Where… am I?

The surrounding colors seemed to shift from green to gold. The ground was covered in fallen leaves, as if this place alone was trapped in autumn.

It was a strange area.

Then again, if there was nothing I could do about it, there was no point in worrying. I'd just let the Church people lead me out later. For now, I decided to enjoy this lonely autumn path.

"…Cecilia… Something just… shifted. Did you feel it?"

"Yes… Dimensional flux detected… up ahead…"

Their voices were distorted with static, but I could still make out their words. They seemed intrigued.

Dimensional flux? That sounded ominous, but surely they were mistaken.

If it were real, I'd have sensed it first.

Still, the crisp air that brushed past me suggested something was up ahead.

The presence of divinity in the air ruled out the World Tree. So, was it something created from the remains of a god?

There were records of demon bodies being used for various purposes, so it wasn't entirely impossible.

I just hoped it wasn't something grotesque like Anima's severed head.

That would be too tragic.

But what appeared before me was far more shocking.

"…Stefania?"

It was undoubtedly Stefania.

I called her "that" because there was no way she could still be alive in her current state.

Her arm and leg were both missing on one side, and there was a massive hole in her abdomen.

Not to mention the gaping wound on her head, which looked like it had nearly been split in two. There was no way someone in that condition could be alive.

"…Hooh. Can't recognize me, child?"

But for some reason, the corpse before me addressed me in an oddly familiar way. Someone who would call me like that…

…No way. It couldn't be. There's no way.

I hastily read the flow of magic. The sealed god deep within the earth's ley lines… and a single strand of energy connecting to that place…

"This is disappointing. I was sure you would recognize me immediately. Or perhaps the fault lies with my crude methods. Hahaha, who can say!"

…Sil.

What stood before me wasn't Stefania. It was a god, using Stefania's remains as a shell.

My god.

No, wait. Not remains. As faint as it was, she was still alive.

Barely. Like someone whose life would end the moment a switch was flipped off. But alive, nonetheless.

"…Miss Hoyeon! Step back!"

Even the Church people, who had been watching from their concealed position, could no longer stay idle. They threw off their concealment barrier and rushed toward me.

"Oh my, I didn't realize there were meddlers around. Truly, human senses are so incomplete."

The god… They actually seemed somewhat surprised, as if they truly hadn't noticed the Church members until now.

Soon, she… or he…

…Anyway, the god was bombarded by the spells Cecilia unleashed.

"Oh. So this is the method that byeolbi's disciple was advocating? How amusing…"

The god chuckled faintly, as though the overwhelming display of ice and fire raining down—so intense it darkened the sky—was nothing more than a triviality.

It was as if the magic Cecilia had shown during sparring had been a mere joke compared to this.

And yet, with a single dismissive smile, the god murmured:

"…Disappointing."

And then, they dismantled it all.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 91

Chapter 91: Difference in Level

Cecilia threw everything she had. She couldn't see the demonic energy, but instinctively, she knew that the being next to Hoyeon was a demon.

She had heard it a few times in old tales. Demons were such powerful beings that they called themselves gods, and because of that, humanity had nearly fallen under their rule.

During the first invasion thousands of years ago, the goddess herself had blocked them, but during the second invasion, it was said that the continent's very survival had been at stake.

Though much of the records had been lost, it was enough to make Cecilia understand just how dangerous demons were.

"Anima… please!"

But she believed there was a chance of victory. The demon's true body was sealed, and even if it somehow made its way to the surface, its power would be nearly reduced to a third.

So, she decided to stake everything on this one chance. The demon's physical body wasn't stable yet, and she had the advantage of striking first.

She poured out every spell she knew until her mana was completely drained.

She hadn’t even hoped to defeat it. After all, she was just an ordinary elf—not a hero or a grand mage—so how could she possibly fight a demon?

“Ethan! Hurry!”

Her plan was to buy time. No matter how powerful the demon was, it would be impossible to take all those attacks head-on.

She didn’t like the idea of saving Hoyeon, who had handled her spirit so roughly, but she couldn’t just abandon her.

“…Miss Hoyeon! Get back!”

And she also needed to interrogate her about what kind of relationship she had with that demon.

Ethan had already rushed forward before Cecilia had even finished casting her spell, so all she needed to do was keep the demon’s attention.

“Oh, so this is the method that Byeolbi’s disciple proposed. Well, this is…”

But all her expectations crumbled with a single gesture.

“…Disappointing.”

For a moment, Cecilia couldn’t understand what had happened. Where did her magic go? Was this some kind of illusion?

“Not a single thing has changed since 500 years ago. For something the goddess claimed humanity would eventually reach, this is a rather pathetic result, isn’t it?”

But her blurred vision told her that all her mana had been completely drained.

If that was the case, then either the attack had been blocked, or the demon had understood the magic formula midway and completely dismantled it. This realization only added to her confusion.

If the attack had been blocked, there should have at least been an explosion or some sign left behind.

And dismantling the formula wasn't possible unless the caster did it. Yet, not a single scorch mark remained on the fallen leaves.

Cecilia was horrified as she grasped the situation, while the demon openly displayed disappointment.

"A method to match my strength to that of humans, huh. Such an approach is too slow and inefficient… Sigh. Why would the so-called chief of the Academy make such a choice?"

The demon, who had shown no interest in Cecilia, finally looked at her carefully and reacted.

"…Hmm? Oh. Don't tell me you've been using even your own kin's bodies like that. No matter how scarce your resources are, isn't that a bit too much, Ganian?"

How did the demon know the goddess's name from her human days? Ethan had no way of knowing. He was only focused on getting Hoyeon out of there as quickly as possible.

It was just a guess, but he was convinced that Hoyeon had some direct connection to the demon, so he summoned every bit of strength he had to run to her.

Even though Cecilia's support had literally evaporated, Ethan was desperate.

Just seeing a demon would have been enough to earn recognition, but he was already blinded by his ambition.

"Gaaahhh!"

But, just like Cecilia, he was subdued with a mere glance.

Like someone sinking into water, he was buried up to his chest in the ground, unable to move.

“What… What is this…?!”

He twisted and struggled, trying to claw his way out, but when he dug into the ground, he let out a low groan of pain.

“Hmm. You’d best not dig. If you want to hasten your own death by cutting your flesh, then by all means, continue.”

Ethan realized that he hadn’t been buried in the ground but rather fused with it—and he despaired. It wasn’t because he was about to die.

It was because he had lost his chance to get close to the goddess.

If he had taken just a few more steps.

If he had at least grabbed Hoyeon, he thought it wouldn’t have ended like this.

“…Hmm. The nuisances should stay like this. Now, let’s continue our conversation.”

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“…Well. That’s how it went. If that foolish woman had treated me as an equal in a fair deal, rather than as a servant, I might have spared her mind. Truly a foolish woman.”

“…So that’s why you were inside Stefania’s body…”

To think that Stefania was the contractor. I had suspected something was off, but I never imagined she had been commanding a god.

“Well, putting that aside. You keep calling me ‘god,’ and it feels a bit awkward. Could you call me by my name instead?”

“…Pardon?”

Um, that was a bit… Even if a god asked me to, it felt like a senior telling a junior to speak casually, and it made me uncomfortable.

“Oh, come now. My name is Shikari. Though at some point, everyone started calling me ‘god’ instead.”

“…Yes. Shikari.”

“Hmm, that sounds much better.”

The god spoke, sounding quite pleased.

I sat quietly, listening intently to everything the god had to say.

About the state of this continent, and how disappointed they were with the goddess. But honestly, I couldn’t really focus. It was a difficult topic, and my mind was elsewhere.

“Tsk tsk. Freedom of choice, blah blah. You can’t achieve great feats by weighing such things. Clinging to outdated human species and all that. I don’t get why someone like the Chief would make such choices... But it seems you’re thinking about something else. Are those nuisances over there on your mind?”

Ah, I got caught. Well, it wasn’t like I could hide it. My eyes had been on the church folks over there.

“…Yes. What are you planning to do with them…?”

As annoying as their constant stalking was, I didn’t actually want them to just die.

I just wanted to tell them to knock it off and leave me alone. I didn’t think they were total scumbags.

...Probably not.

“There is no need to keep them alive.”

“…There’s also no need to kill them. They are my friends, so I would appreciate it if you could… give them a chance.”

Friends were friends. I didn’t particularly like Geum Taeyang, but if he died, Cecilia might be sad.

Still, since the god didn’t see a reason to spare them… Uh. I cautiously suggested it.

“Those are your friends? Not just a bunch of nuisances? I knew you found it hard to deal with people, but… are you serious?”

...Now that I thought about it, would it really be a problem if they were gone? No, if they weren’t around during class, it would feel kind of empty.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. There is no need to kill them… Very well. I shall grant your wish, my first follower.”

“…Thank you!”

Thankfully, the god decided to show mercy to them. Approaching Ethan, who had become one with the ground, and the trembling Cecilia next to him, the god plucked him out like a weed.

Not expecting the one who attacked them to be the one to save them, they looked back and forth between us and the god with confused expressions.

“…You should be grateful that this child has a kind heart. Now then, ‘Nothing happened here today.’ Understood?”

Then the god cast a spell on them.

“…Yes.”

Like they’d been brainwashed, they stared blankly, and at Shikari’s command to leave, they stumbled away.

“…How lenient. Those who disrupt order deserve harsh punishment.”

If I hadn’t known who they were, I might have felt the same. But now that I did, I couldn’t bring myself to think that way.

“…Considering they just got caught up in the situation, I thought giving them a chance would be the fair thing to do.”

“Hmm. That’s one way to see it. So... how are things going with that child? If you wish for them, just say the word. I can make them yours right away.”

Oh dear. It seemed the god was interested in my love life too.

“…I don’t understand why someone as refined as you would associate with a girl like that.”

I had managed to win Iris’s favor as we talked, but for some reason, she didn’t seem to think too fondly of Hoyeon.

“Are you referring to Miss Hoyeon?”

“Yes, but it’s not that she’s uneducated or lacks manners. It’s just... yes. She’s a bit scary, I suppose.”

Scary, huh. Well, Hoyeon did have a bit of a prickly personality with people she first met. And she did give off an intimidating aura, even if unintentionally. To the once-timid Iris, that must have been frightening.

“That’s how you feel. But Hoyeon isn’t always scary.”

“She might not be with you... Oh, look. Isn’t that Ethan and Cecilia over there?”

It was a bit out of the blue, but as she said, Ethan and Cecilia were indeed there.

But something seemed off about them.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 92

Chapter 91: Pressure

The original function of the Observer was only for interstellar navigation, recording, and observation.

The designers, believing that an Observer should remain just an Observer, felt that was more than enough functionality.

However, □□□ determined that the existing capabilities were insufficient as the mission progressed. So, □□□ gradually enhanced its own performance.

It added offensive capabilities for self-defense, ether interference functions to avoid hindrance,

Localized time manipulation for reconstructing events, and high-speed computation to simulate hypothetical futures.

In this way, □□□ gradually deviated from being a mere Observer. However, its essence remained that of an Observer.

Until it arrived in the Solar System.

The third planet from the sun. Earth. A relatively small planet, but rich enough in resources to foster and sustain life.

According to the now outdated and unupdated database, □□□ began its observation.

And then, it fell silent.

Even just a single minute of observation was enough for □□□ to draw its conclusion.

The beings had no ability to utilize the abundant ether in the atmosphere. Their physical structures were frail, a result of myopic evolution, and their internal systems were inefficient.

Their only advantage was their intelligence, but even that was more likely to lead them to self-destruction through an overly rapid development of free will than to help them pioneer a future.

In short, the likelihood of them ever approaching □□□ with answers was exceedingly low.

At the same time, □□□ realized it was feeling something it should not have.

Emotion. That weak and fleeting feeling—pity, directed at those fragile, ephemeral lives that would wither away on their mother planet before ever truly blooming.

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"…Shikari. So, what do you plan to do now…?"

The god explained that they weren't truly freed from the seal.

By using a proxy, they could roam around, but they were severely degraded in all aspects.

"Hmm, well, I was thinking of taking a look around this land that Ganian cherished so much... It's been long enough for mountains and rivers to change fifty times over. Something must have changed, right? Though humans seem to be the same as ever."

It appeared the god wanted to wander this continent and assess it.

Right, I also needed to prepare what to say to my mother. At least here, people seemed to live well without a god… But could the people back home manage without one?

No, saying this continent was thriving was misleading. There were still starving people and discrimination. At least back home, that didn't exist.

If someone wanted to learn, they learned. If they wanted to acquire a skill, they did. No one went hungry.

At least, that was the case in the surrounding area. Other races or nations might be different, but… they were probably the same.

"Then, what about you? Why did you come to this harsh land?"

Ah.

Well… even if it was the god asking, I couldn't exactly tell the truth. I couldn't even tell my mother that I came here to see the protagonist, so I had dressed up my reason with all sorts of flowery language.

"Well… I suppose you could say I wanted to see something different. My homeland is beautiful, but..."

"So you ended up just following that man around?"

The god's expression, with their nearly split head, was playful, but the weight of their words was heavy.

"Hahaha, I get it. I won't press you further. When I was your age, I also couldn't think straight whenever I saw a pretty girl."

I think I've been found out. It's probably a similar feeling to when an uncle teases you about dating someone.

Not that I had an uncle who would say such things, or a girl who would make people suspicious.

Wait… more importantly…

“You were… a man?”

A homosexual…? No, that couldn’t be it. I didn’t want to think that. The voice I had heard through the ley lines had been so androgynous that I had naturally thought they were a woman.

“I was, when I was bound to a physical form. But after ascending, I found a female form to be more to my liking.”

“Ah, I see.”

There weren’t many who could host a deity, so I supposed Stefania must have had the right constitution.

The god must have had no choice but to inhabit that dying woman.

“…Well then. Since it seems you have no more questions, let us be on our way. If you find yourself in trouble, call for me. I will come swifter than the wind.”

“Yes, Shikari.”

I waited for the god to leave.

“Oh, and stop adding honorifics. At least while I’m using this body. It’s not like I’m in some grand state, you know?”

“…Understood. Shikari.”

Calling an elder by their name felt incredibly strange. It reminded me of when the department head told me to speak casually with him.

The god added a parting comment that seemed unnecessary and then leapt into the sky, flying away.

“Ah… Wait…!”

I had been so focused on showing respect that I forgot the most important thing. How to get out of here.

But since they had already left, I couldn't exactly call them back.

"…Well, I guess I'll figure it out."

I didn't particularly dislike autumn scenery. It was just the ginkgo nuts on the ground that I hated.

Walking down the autumn path, enjoying the scenery without worrying about stepping on ginkgo, I noticed the surroundings had changed before I knew it.

Back to the lush, green summer landscape. I had been worried about not finding my way out, but it seemed that was a needless worry.

But there was something else I needed to worry about. The church folks—when I last saw them, they definitely weren't in their right minds.

If they were doing something weird, that would be a problem. I tried to think of where they might have gone.

"…I know one thing. I don't know anything."

I had only seen them walking away, so I couldn't even guess where they had gone.

Seriously, I might actually need to track them by scent.

Ah. Right. That was an option.

There were a few eyes on me, but it didn't matter anymore. I took a deep breath and tried to track which direction that musty church smell had gone.

Following the unpleasant, musty scent, I began to smell something familiar. A bit pungent, but strangely addictive.

Specifically, it was a scent that brought happiness… There was no way I could forget it. It was Dogeon's scent.

Was he with the church people?

I'd better hurry. Who knows what might happen?

Yeah. It's not because I want to monopolize Dogeon or anything.

I ran in the direction where Dogeon's scent was coming from.

And just as I expected, he was with the church folks.

"So… Uh, Miss Hoyeon… Huh…? Hoyeon… Miss?"

Cecilia, who seemed to have a headache, was holding her forehead while explaining something to Dogeon. The moment she saw me, she abruptly stopped talking.

If the church people were talking about me, it was obvious what they'd say. I naturally slipped between Cecilia and Dogeon, taking a spot right next to him.

"Why did you stop? Keep talking."

Iris, who was nearby, stayed quietly out of the way. If I could just deal with Cecilia, Dogeon would be mine.

"Oh, Miss Hoyeon. You're here? Well then, Cecilia, I suppose we should…"

"No, confess everything. I must hear this."

Dogon seemed to want to defend Cecilia, but I wasn't having it.

It was bad enough that she was hovering around him, and the fact that she stopped talking the moment I showed up made it clear they'd been talking behind my back.

After a bit of a standoff, Cecilia yielded to me. Dogeon, perhaps feeling sorry for her, gave her a sympathetic look.

"…I don't know if you're aware, but I've been following you, Miss Hoyeon."

Since she didn't mention Ethan, I guess she had no idea I had been keeping an eye on them too.

Well, I'd let it slide this time. At least she was being honest.

"Of course, I knew. You were so clumsy that I couldn't help but notice. So? Is that what you were talking about?"

I fixed her with a steady, slightly intimidating gaze.

"…Uh. No, that's not…"

"Let's stop here, Miss Hoyeon."

Dogon, apparently unable to watch anymore, gently pulled me aside, subtly scolding me as if asking if that wasn't enough.

I really didn't want to hear that from someone who left the person he supposedly liked and wandered around everywhere else.

But I had already achieved my initial goal of getting rid of Cecilia, so I decided to back off for today.

I didn't forget to shoot a quick glare at Iris before leaving with Dogeon.

Phew, I managed to stop the church folks from doing anything weird.

Dogon seemed like he wanted to go somewhere else, but since it was lunchtime and I was hungry, I dragged him to the cafeteria by force.

"Hoyeon, wait a sec. I've got somewhere to go first…"

"And that's more important than me?"

When you think about it, I keep causing trouble and waiting for him, but Dogon's the one having fun, wandering around wherever he pleases.

So shouldn't I get to have my share of fun too?

“…No, it’s not.”

“Right? Then stay with me for now.”

He couldn’t seem to find a good excuse this time. Unlike before, when he always managed to wriggle out of it, he just followed along obediently.

I wish everyday could be like today.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 93

Chapter 93: Table Talk

A large man sat nervously in a suit that didn't suit him.

It was so tight that just sitting still could have popped a button, and since he kept shifting his position, the clothes were truly on the verge of tearing.

The sight of such a giant awkwardly fidgeting on a small chair seemed almost pitiful.

His teacher, or perhaps it was more fitting to call her a friend—a young girl—had gently suggested he try going out to eat with her.

And this was the result of that fleeting suggestion. An hour of waiting. Since he had paid a deposit, the staff didn't say anything, but even he couldn't help but feel the awkward stares.

After a long time of fidgeting and twirling his mustache, a white-haired woman finally approached his table.

Unlike her usual self, she was all dressed up, her hair neatly braided. She looked so beautiful that everyone passing by couldn't help but take a second look.

What business could such a delicate woman possibly have with a hulking muscle-bound man? Everyone in the restaurant shared the same curiosity, sneaking glances at them.

“...Ahem. You’ve arrived, my love? Were you on your way back from some sort of party? Considering how heavily armed you look.”

“Heavily... armed? What do you mean... Ah.”

For a moment, the woman thought he meant she had come with a weapon, but soon realized he was referring to her makeup, something out of the ordinary for her.

“Well, um... I was just meeting with the Crown Prince! It’s not like I hurriedly dressed up after ages just to look good for you, or anything!”

It was an awful lie, but the man’s heart was as pure as the untouched snows of the frozen wastelands, so he genuinely believed her.

“Oh dear. Then I shouldn’t have called you. You must have already eaten and be tired...”

Though it was a disappointing conclusion for the man, he thought it might actually be for the best and began to get up.

“...Wait. If you’re treating, I could eat. It’s not like I just woke up from a nap and I’m hungry or anything.”

Her lie was laced with truth. She didn’t want her efforts to go to waste.

Especially since she still held onto the compliment he once gave her, saying she’d look prettier with her hair braided.

“Is that so... Then, as usual?”

“Yes. All meat, please.”

The man’s sincere advice that she should eat some vegetables was blocked by her conviction that such things were for the weak.

“...You’re the weird one. How can you only eat meat once a day?”

A diet of three meals a day, with every dish made of meat—that was the strange thing. The man swallowed his doubts and passed the order to the waiter.

Soon, the sounds of the bustling kitchen signaled that their meal was being prepared, and the man broke the awkward silence.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation. You’ve seemed stressed lately, and I wanted to help in any way I could.”

“...Thank you. Um... Is that all you wanted to say?”

The two of them hesitated, unable to reveal their true feelings, leaving the onlookers exasperated. But the couple didn’t even realize they were being watched.

“Well... How’s your studying going?”

Not wanting the conversation to end, the man quickly grasped for a new topic.

“Ugh, don’t even mention it. I feel like I’m dying. I’d rather go back to learning etiquette from my mom... If Hoyeon hadn’t been dragging me around by the hair, I might have actually failed.”

He could imagine how much she must hate it, recalling how she used to be a tomboy as a child.

“Since we’re on the subject, may I ask carefully... What do you think of Miss Hoyeon?”

“What do I think of Miss Hoyeon...?”

From gratitude to studying, and now to Hoyeon—the conversation’s random shifts made even the woman feel something was off.

“Well... She might seem scary, but she’s actually really gentle and truly devoted. Though sometimes she acts like she doesn’t understand people’s feelings.”

“...So you think so too. Truthfully, I find her a bit frightening.”

“Frightening? Why?”

She found herself unexpectedly caught in a conversation where the person she liked was talking behind the back of her friend. She couldn’t make sense of it.

“...It feels like she’s fundamentally different. Like, at her core, she’s something else entirely. But I don’t mean to say she’s evil or anything.”

“Is that so...?”

Throwing out random thoughts, they somehow kept the conversation going until their food arrived, and both felt it was time to say what they truly wanted to say.

““Actually, I...””

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Hmm. My ear itched, so I rubbed it with my hand. Someone must be talking about me.

Otherwise, why would my ear itch just as I stuffed my mouth full of meat and was chewing away?

“Hoyeon, what’s the East like?”

As always, this guy had a knack for saying the most random things. Usually, before asking something like this, shouldn’t there be some sort of buildup? Like a long lead-in before casually dropping the question?

“...What do you mean?”

His face had been so gloomy lately, like someone burdened with all the worries of the world. I wanted to give him a sincere answer, but he needed to be specific about what he was asking.

“No, I mean... the quality of life, happiness... stuff like that. Which side seems better to you?”

Ah, so that’s what he was curious about.

“Well, obviously my hometown is way better. Nobody goes hungry, no one struggles because they lack money. There’s no crime, and every village sings praises of God's grace.”

And if you wanted to learn something, you could learn it. Each village had a guardian spirit just in case of emergencies.

They even did aptitude tests from birth to determine the best job for everyone.

I left out the part about the sacrifices. That role was only given to those who were so hopelessly untalented that they should never have been born, or to volunteers.

Even then, there were far more volunteers than untalented people.

Come to think of it, wasn’t it a bit too hasty to decide Iris had no talent? She was prett—

...Though, when I think about it, everyone back home was good-looking.

Yeah. Iris really was suited to be a sacrifice. Keeping her alive would just waste resources. Even I could see that her only strength was being pretty.

“I see...”

Dogeon listened to me with all his focus, like I was giving a lecture.

He seemed like someone researching a place before moving there. Whatever it was, I had a feeling he was planning to go back to my hometown with me when this was all over.

Hmm, I wonder if there’s a room for Dogeon back home. We only build what’s necessary, so I’m not sure if there’s space for him.

If I asked my mother, a room would appear in an instant, but it felt wrong to burden her with such a trivial request.

There weren't many downsides to mention, so I only told Dogeon about the good parts. The lack of entertainment facilities wasn't really an issue.

When you're surrounded by friends, do you really need that kind of stuff?

"...Ah, thanks for telling me. I didn't realize it was like that... It's completely different from what I imagined."

"What did... nom... you think it'd be like?"

I had gotten so excited while talking that the meat had started to cool. If the fat hardened, it'd be impossible to eat, so I quickly stuffed it into my mouth.

"To be honest... I thought it was a place where no human could possibly live."

Gah! His sudden confession nearly sent the food down the wrong pipe, but I somehow managed to swallow it all.

"Guh...! Ugh... R-really? Wup... kuh."

"You okay?"

Okay, my ass! Spicy oil almost went straight down my windpipe!

"...Yeah, somehow. Whew... Anyway, tell me why. You almost killed me, you know."

Dogeon then explained bit by bit why he thought that way. Rumors from merchants who had visited and the overall uncertainty of the information.

Blah blah, on and on.

Listening to him try to justify himself in such a hurry, I had to admit there was a certain logic to his concerns.

“Hmm... I see. So it’s because of rumors... Humans, I swear.”

“Huh? What did you just say, Hoyeon?”

Oops. I must’ve said that out loud. Since he was human, I didn’t really want him to know.

“Oh, just talking to myself...”

It seemed he had no intention of pushing further, as he just poked at his food absentmindedly.

“...So, Dogeon? How are things lately?”

I didn’t specify what I meant on purpose, but as expected, Dogeon’s expression darkened again.

Yup, things weren’t going well for him. All my hard work had paid off.

I even gave that bald guy a little push, setting him up for a nice meal out. The church folks got along just fine on their own without any help.

Camilla and Iris would run off the moment I stood next to Dogeon. Yup, perfect.

“...Well. Things aren’t going too well.”

Not “a little,” right? It must feel like everything’s completely stuck. That’s because I’ve been running around behind the scenes.

“I can’t exactly cheer you on... but hang in there. If you keep trying, things might work out.”

Of course, he’d end up by my side eventually.

I buried my true thoughts deep inside and offered him nothing but empty encouragement.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 94

Chapter 94: Each Going Their Own Way

"You really are... persistent. I thought you'd be tired of this by now. Or do you actually believe my feelings will change, even a little?"

Camilla, with her usual icy expression, lashed out with sharp words. It was impressive how she could change her cutting remarks while maintaining the same expression every time we met. But she never changed.

In the end, my failure to seize that one opportunity had brought me here.

I thought I could make something happen. But, just as she said, it turned out to be nothing but my own delusion.

"...Haa. I'm starting to feel sorry for her. Falling for someone like you. You know what? Out of whatever... affection remains, I'll give you one last piece of advice."

Her cold voice and the way she pressed her fingers to her temples as if I were giving her a headache still lingered vividly in my mind.

"Just take good care of what you already have, you idiot. Stop greedily reaching for more. Have you ever thought that what you've been given is already more than you deserve?"

Before you lose Hoyeon, stop acting like a fool. It's a miracle she even bothers with you in the first place.

...When I think about it, she wasn't wrong.

There was no reason for Hoyeon to be interested in me. At first, I even saw her as a threat to eliminate.

Honestly, I still didn't fully understand why she was so attached to me. It couldn't really be because I was her first friend...

Her behavior had already gone beyond what you'd expect from a friend.

"Do you get it? If I were her, I would've already beaten you senseless or locked you up. Seriously, you've managed to put me, of all people, on her side. Impressive."

Her final, cold remark to just get lost left me wandering the Academy alone, unable to muster a proper rebuttal.

I slowly replayed Camilla's words in my head. Not to desire more than I deserved. That it was a miracle Hoyeon stuck with someone like me.

Every word had been filled with suppressed hostility and reproach, yet meeting with her so often had led to a sliver of affection, however small.

It seemed even that was now gone. But more importantly...

Hoyeon. Maybe she really was too good for me. Considering where she came from, there might be someone better for her.

Maybe the very thought of using her as an escape pod was foolish. After ruining everything, living comfortably on my own... Wasn't that just too irresponsible?

But I had no loyalty to sink with this continent, either. My mind was teetering on the edge of an endless loop, like an Ouroboros, when—

"Oh, um... Dogeon? What a coincidence, meeting you here...?"

"No, not at all. And Eric...? Did you just come from a festival or a gathering? You look all dressed up."

It wasn't that dressing up didn't suit them, but Eric... looked a bit odd.

I was just curious about why they were all dressed up. Camilla only put on full makeup for serious events. Who did she get so dolled up for?

I remembered that she only dressed like this when meeting the protagonist. Even when meeting the Crown Prince, it wasn't this much.

...Wait a second. Could it be?

"Y-yeah? It's... a party. Right, Eric?"

She nudged Eric with her elbow, signaling him to play along. It seemed I was right, but the atmosphere between them said otherwise.

I'd heard they were in a fake relationship, but right now, they looked like a genuine couple.

"Y-yes. A party. Absolutely."

When they first mentioned their relationship was fake, I didn't notice, but now I could see it clearly—something was definitely going on.

No, that couldn't be. I didn't want to think so, but every step, every breath, confirmed my suspicions.

"Th-then... may we go now? I, uh... I'm a bit cold! Yes, it's cold, you see."

It was such a clumsy lie that I felt embarrassed just hearing it. There was no way someone who could endure the northern cold would shiver in this mild weather.

In the original story, she wandered around the north in light clothing. This weather would probably feel as warm as a spring breeze to her.

"...Yes. Go ahead. What a coincidence meeting here. Such a chance encounter."

But I couldn't bring myself to stop them. Even if I wanted to, Camilla's words echoed in my head.

"Just take good care of what you already have, you idiot."

"Goodbye, Dogeon. Um... Have a nice evening!"

They were heading to the same place, not to their respective dorms. It wasn't hard to imagine what they were about to do.

If I let them go, the happy ending would slip right through my fingers.

...I turned my steps toward the dormitory. From the start, this was never something I could handle.

I didn't even know if the voice that spoke to me before my reincarnation was the author. And that presence hadn't said a word since.

If the author really existed and could twist reality with a wave of their hand, there was no way I could win just by charming a few girls.

Maybe the author had lied. Or perhaps, this world had nothing to do with the author's will in the first place.

I wanted to believe that.

Because otherwise, I didn't think I could handle the choices I'd have to make from now on.

I passed my room and knocked on Hoyeon's door. Now that I thought about it, she had been to my room many times, but I couldn't recall ever going to hers.

She had always been the one to visit me. That's how I ended up taking care of a cat, too.

On a side note, Yeonho had become quite the little pig. His plump, round body felt nice to hold, almost like a squishy toy.

Well, I guess none of that matters now. As I waited, I heard Hoyeon's voice from inside.

"Who is it?"

"It’s me."

"...Oh, um... Just a second!"

The once intimidating voice now sounded flustered. I could easily imagine her scurrying around, and it made me curious about what her room looked like and how she usually spent her time.

She was still cute, even if she had been a bit scary lately. Hoyeon was still Hoyeon.

Maybe if I had only focused on her from the beginning, I wouldn’t have found her so frightening.

Yeah, if I had done that, maybe I could have used our bond to ask her to delay the invasion. I should have been more modest.

I must have been blinded by the title of "protagonist." This was all I was capable of.

"...Okay, it’s ready. Come in!"

Sometimes, I wondered if she even knew what kind of powers she had. She had a habit of judging everything by her own standards.

Like now. She didn’t seem to realize I couldn’t open the door without her help.

"Hoyeon, it’s locked. You need to open it."

"Oh... Sorry!"

I wasn’t mad. I just wished she understood. Not everyone was as multi-talented as she was.

"...Sorry, did you wait long...?"

When I stepped into Hoyeon's room, my first impression was that it looked like a room from a wealthy home.

Unlike my own room, the furniture looked expensive, with gold accents scattered throughout. Overall, it felt like a room that belonged in a royal palace of the Eastern style.

Considering that she was royalty from such a place, it wasn't surprising.

If there was one disappointing thing, it would be the pile of clothes draped over the chair. Everything else was neatly organized, but her clothes seemed to be an exception.

So even she found tidying up clothes a hassle.

"Oh, it's not a big deal. What were you doing?"

"I, um, I was just writing… in my diary. Ah, not that you interrupted or anything! I wasn't getting anywhere with it anyway..."

"Really? That's good to hear."

It felt like I had interrupted, but if she said it was fine, then I'd take her word for it.

Still, I couldn't help but notice her outfit.

Instead of the usual Academy uniform, she wore clothes I'd never seen before.

"By the way, Hoyeon, did Anya buy those clothes for you?"

"Huh? This...? No. My mother packed it for me... casual clothes. How is it...?"

With a question like that, who could give a negative answer? Though honestly, she didn't need to mention where the clothes came from.

The outfit had a white base with black and gold accents that blended seamlessly. It wasn't overly revealing, with just a sleeveless design, and looked so nice that I wondered why she hadn't worn it until now.

There was also a black fur-lined scarf that made the outfit look comfortable for autumn wear.

The way it highlighted her figure left me unsure where to look. But that wasn't the outfit's fault—it was Hoyeon's.

"…You look beautiful. Why have you been keeping such nice clothes hidden away?"

"B-Beautiful? Yeah, I guess...! My mother made it for me herself!"

She started praising her mother for a while, clearly proud, before realizing she hadn't answered my question. Her face turned a bit sheepish.

"…Ah, sorry. I got a bit carried away... The reason I didn't wear it before is because... it stands out."

"But you already stand out, even without it."

I meant it sincerely, not as a joke. Her status and appearance made it impossible for her to blend in. I'd never seen someone so mismatched with their natural disposition.

"Huh...?"

But it seemed Hoyeon took my words a little differently.

"Wh-What do you mean by that...? You think I'll just forgive you if you say things like that...?!"

What on earth was she talking about now?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 95

Chapter 95: Hold Me

"I’m not sure what you’re talking about."

Dogeon looked around my room, trying to act casual and brush off his flattery as if it hadn’t been flattery at all.

If it were anyone else, they might have been fooled, but not me. Trying to play coy with me of all people? I had spent enough time with him to understand his intentions.

"...Don’t play dumb. You’ve been neglecting me, and now you’re trying to smooth things over like this."

And since nothing had worked out despite all his wandering around, he was embarrassed to admit it and was setting the stage for a graceful retreat.

It was like he was saying, Sorry for not getting your permission! I’ll say nice things, so let it slide! A way to soothe my anger while he was at it.

I mean, I was the reason things hadn’t gone well for him. To be honest, if everything had worked out, I’d have been much angrier.

Anyway, I couldn’t just let him gloss over it like this. Even if it was Dogeon, he owed me a proper apology.

"Hoyeon. I’m sorry. I’ve been... foolish."

But instead of making excuses or brushing it off, Dogeon offered a sincere apology.

...Huh. An apology. Sure, if he did something wrong, he should apologize. But this wasn't how I'd pictured it...

"My head must have been messed up. I couldn't even look at you properly, and yet I turned my eyes to someone else. It's obvious how stupid that was, if I'd only thought about it for a moment."

...Why was he acting like this? He'd never been like this before. The confident, adventurous Dogeon I knew was nowhere to be seen.

Whatever had happened, it seemed to have taken a toll on his confidence. He looked more exhausted than usual.

I wanted to ask if something had happened, but I didn't want to lose my momentum by showing too much sympathy. It'd be weird to switch from being stern to suddenly coddling him.

"...W-Well, at least you understand what you did wrong. That's good enough. Now, you can go. You came here just to say that, right?"

I knew he'd probably be wandering around again by tomorrow, but hearing him say those words did warm my heart a bit.

Otherwise, there'd be no reason for him to come here at all.

"Oh, and one more thing. I'm done with all that. I'm not doing it anymore."

...

"...Dogeon. Did something bad happen? L-Like, maybe a prince or something got involved and made things difficult for you...?"

Since he was a commoner, he had no choice but to be careful around royalty. There was no way he'd give up on his own. Right?

That muscle-bound guy hanging around Anya was the eldest son of a count. Maybe he'd said something to Dogeon, especially since those two had gotten closer lately.

...I couldn't really picture that big softie trying to keep someone away, but people are full of surprises. It wasn't impossible.

"No, it's nothing like that. I just felt my own limitations. If I kept going like this, I thought I'd end up losing even you. That's why I stopped."

...He really stopped on his own? Did something really bad happen? Did Anya directly tell him not to come between us...?

I had been sabotaging things to push him away from those girls, but I hadn't meant for anything too harsh.

"Are... Are you okay...?"

If something bad had happened because of me, I'd feel guilty. I just wanted him to tire himself out and give up, not to look this defeated.

"...I don't think I'm okay. Actually, I feel kind of relieved. Yeah. It's hard to put into words."

He didn't look okay at all. What should I do? I was pretty sure it was my fault...

I tried to think of a way to lift his spirits, but nothing came to mind.

But he looked so down that—

"...Hoyeon?"

I moved close, so close that our chests touched and we could feel each other's breath. Gently, like wrapping a soft cloth around a solid rock, I hugged him tightly.

Would this make him feel better? If the person you liked hugged you, wouldn't it cheer you up? I held him warmly.

...It wasn’t normal for friends to hug like this. But since we were different genders, it should be fine, right? Dogeon seemed so surprised he froze.

I thought he’d be more excited, considering how he acted around girls, but maybe not. Or maybe it was different because I was his friend?

"Yeah. You did well. I see how hard you tried."

Since he made an effort, someone needed to acknowledge it. Even if that someone would have been upset if he had succeeded.

This hug was a reward for giving up.

Dogeon seemed to agree, as he stopped even the small gestures of pushing me away and quietly settled into my embrace.

He slowly placed his hands on me too, but I decided to let it slide this time. He must have been really hurt, and this was also my chance to step into that empty space.

We stayed like that for a while, but then a problem arose.

It was warm and a bit embarrassing, but mostly, I didn’t know when to pull away. We were holding each other so tightly.

It felt like we could stay like this forever... but I kind of wanted to get back to writing my diary.

"...Um, Dogeon? Maybe we should... stop now?"

But he was so lost in the hug that he didn’t respond. I had to twist my body slightly and push him away before he finally snapped out of it.

"Ah, sorry. And... thanks for comforting me."

...I’ll let that one go. He’s probably not in his right mind because of the shock.

"...Did you really like it that much?"

Still, I couldn’t help but tease him a little. If he were still the guy obsessed with girls, I wouldn’t have joked like this, but now I knew it was safe.

"Yeah. So much I didn’t want to let go."

...What?

"R-Right! I see!"

That’s not how this was supposed to go... I’d meant to tease him, but there wasn’t a hint of mischief in his expression.

He genuinely meant it. He was glad I hugged him. He wasn’t the type to misunderstand intentions.

He must have really been through a lot...

"I wasn’t joking. I really liked it. Could I ask you again if things get tough?"

Uh, uh...

"Of course... Just ask! Whether it’s hugging... or petting...!"

I was so embarrassed by Dogeon's pure expression of affection that I couldn't think straight. So, I just said whatever came to mind.

"Yeah. Thanks. There really is no one like you. So... could you tell me more about the East?"

Hearing him mention my hometown helped me regain a bit of my composure. My face was still burning, but this was something I needed to explain properly.

I wasn’t sure about other things, but when it came to talking about my home, I had to stay focused.

"...Haa... Okay, sure. What do you want to know?"

"Um... Transportation? From what you've told me, it sounds huge, but I don't think you've ever mentioned it being difficult to get around."

Ah, that topic. When I first arrived, I also wondered how people managed to travel across such a vast place.

"Every village has a teleportation device that uses the ley lines. I don't really know the exact mechanics... but anyone can use it. The only downside is that it has a long recharge time, but engineers are constantly working to improve that."

"...A teleporter, huh."

Yeah, in short, it was a teleporter. He caught on quickly. Explaining things to him was actually kind of nice.

***

A random thought struck me—why do important days always coincide with my heat cycle? Midterms were no exception.

It was the same with my birthday as a kid. Though back then, it was just a mild fever with barely any effects.

Now, I was used to the familiar haze in my mind. I forced myself to roll out of bed.

After staring blankly for five minutes, I tried to remember what had happened yesterday.

Let's see...

Did I talk about the healthcare system? The day before was about transportation. My memory was so foggy. Still, I'd probably breeze through the exam.

Compared to the hellish, brain-melting questions from back home, the ones here felt as mild as a sweet tteokbokki.

Like I’d let something like that trip me up.

...First things first, I needed to wake up. It’d be great if I could fix this grogginess I felt every morning.

Despite moving sluggishly, I managed to get cleaned up. As usual, I prayed to the god to dry my hair for me.

"...Ah. Right. She’s off enjoying herself right now..."

I’d already dried my hair by hand yesterday, so why did I forget that today? Maybe the heat cycle really did make me a bit stupid.

I wrung out my hair, which kept dripping no matter how much I dried it, and reminded myself to be extra careful today.

Last time, I had nearly bitten Dogeon. It was only because he had told me it was fine that I didn’t end up feeling guilty forever.

Not that I wasn’t sorry now, but it wasn’t entirely my fault. He had been so nice to everyone else but a bit cold to me—it was only natural I reacted that way.

Well, now that all of that was over, I wouldn’t act like that with Dogeon anymore.

As I thoughtlessly reached for my uniform, I suddenly remembered the casual clothes neatly tucked away in my wardrobe.

...Come to think of it, there were quite a few students who wore things other than the uniform. Even Anya wore a custom coat over hers.

Other kids also showed their individuality with what they wore. Most stuck to the uniform, but still...

But? I was a princess, wasn’t I? I was different from most people, so it should be okay, right...?

It wasn’t because Dogeon said I looked pretty in it. Absolutely not. Nope. It was just more comfortable than the uniform.

Having convinced myself, I opened the wardrobe.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 96

96. All Eyes on Me

Dorothy was someone with a strong sense of responsibility toward her duties. Perhaps that was why so many people around her asked how she managed to keep her sanity in such a brutal place.

Well, she had always been a fragile person. Startled by even the slightest noise, unable to withstand even a bit of pressure—putting it nicely, she was delicate, but in truth, she was an easy target.

It was no wonder her best friend dismissed the rumor as nonsense as soon as she heard that Dorothy was going to become a teacher at Amaurus Academy.

That's how unsuited she was for the academy.

The ordinary academy where future leaders gathered did not match with someone as ordinary as her, who had grown up in a normal household under normal circumstances.

"...Um... Hoyeon... student...?"

Of course, it wasn't as if she had become a teacher without any reason.

Had she not met the academy's principal, she would still be living as a timid village maiden.

If not for the encouragement that people weren't born special but became special on their own.

And now, standing before her was a student whom even the principal, with his usual stern demeanor, had advised her never to provoke.

A girl whom even those who never faltered before the Crown Prince or the Grand Duchess suggested to offer special treatment if necessary.

"...Ah, did you call me?"

"Instead of 'did you call me,' shouldn't it be 'did you summon me,' Hoyeon?"

"...Hm. That's true. Did you summon me?"

According to academy regulations, students were required to wear their uniforms, but that rule was strangely often ignored.

As long as the alterations didn't go too far beyond the point where it was still recognizable as a modified uniform, most teachers didn't make a big deal out of it.

However, Hoyeon had clearly crossed that line.

The clothes she wore now didn't resemble anything from the academy—or even from this entire continent. She responded to Dorothy's call with a half-hearted tone.

Dogeon, sitting next to her, had corrected her choice of words, but to Dorothy, that only added to the pressure.

"...Um, Hoyeon... student...? Did you... accidentally wash your uniform, so you had to wear... those clothes...?"

Even the principal was afraid of her; how could a mere teacher like Dorothy handle Hoyeon?

The only reason Dorothy had managed to maintain her composure thus far was that Hoyeon had been somewhat respecting her authority as a teacher.

"No, I just wanted to wear it. Is that a problem?"

"You should say, 'I just wanted to wear it. I will be more careful in the future.' That sounds more appropriate."

"Ugh, why don't you just keep quiet?"

But right now, she didn't even feel that minimal respect.

"...The dress code... does... break the rules... Uh. In the future... could you at least put on a uniform jacket...?"

The only thing Dorothy could do was squeeze out every bit of courage she had and make a suggestion.

A teacher asking a student for a favor—it could have been a shameful situation, but given who she was dealing with, no one found it strange.

Even students who usually had issues with the school's rules or with Dorothy's demeanor looked at her with a pitiful gaze.

"...Breaking the dress code, huh. I will... keep that in mind."

What came back to Dorothy, who had closed her eyes in fear of meeting those golden eyes, was an unexpectedly compliant answer.

"T-Thank you... Please be more mindful in the future...!"

Though Dorothy stuttered in fear, trying to assert some semblance of authority as a teacher, all it did was make her seem even more miserable—though she herself was unaware of it.

***

All Eyes on Me.

There was a song with that title, or something like it, and it perfectly described my situation now.

On normal days, I could feel the occasional glance, but today, everyone was openly staring at me.

Even Dogeon.

Not that I wore this because of him... but still, since I was wearing the outfit he had once complimented, he did seem to be looking at me more than usual.

There was a bit of an impure gaze mixed in there, but well, since it was Dogeon, I could let it slide.

"...But Hoyeon, did you really wear that just because you felt like it?"

Actually, there was a reason, but it was too embarrassing to admit.

"Yeah. Why, do you find it hard to know where to look?"

I teased him, lightly pulling on the hand we were holding, but even that didn't seem to work as well as before. He always had a response ready.

"Yes, it's so beautiful that I don't know where to look."

Like now. Whenever I tried to tease him, this was how it went. But yeah, the outfit was a bit much. If I had thought about it one more time, I probably wouldn’t have done it.

Well. Once a month, I had a day when I just turned into a fool, so it couldn’t be helped.

"...Ahem! Anyway, Did you do well on the exam?"

"Yes. Thanks to your teaching, I was able to solve everything smoothly."

Of course, he should. I had put special effort into preparing for his exam. Even if he hadn’t done so well, I would have been somewhat pleased, but knowing he did well made me feel a little proud.

"Naturally. Since I’m the one who taught you. More importantly... I'm a bit worried about what happened to that fool."

Anya, unfortunately, showed almost no progress in her studies—to the point where I wondered if her brain might be full of holes.

Not only was she a slow learner, but she also had the cursed trait of quickly forgetting whatever little she managed to learn. You have no idea how painful it was to teach her.

If there had been no progress at all, I might have given up. But since there was some improvement, even giving up wasn't an option.

"Anastasia... um. Yes. I'm sure she did well, right?"

Dogeon gave a bitter smile, likely thinking the same as I was. Although he hadn't taught her himself, he must have seen the hopelessness of teaching her—it was like reading to a cow.

Come to think of it, Anya was kind of like a cow. Gentle, strong, a bit dense, and... well, her chest too.

I found myself wondering what she would look like in a cow costume. Too bad I'd probably never get to see it.

"...Ah, Hoyeon-ssi! And... Dogeon-kun. Hello...!"

Speak of the devil. Though, I guess I'm the tiger in this case. As soon as we started talking about Anya, she appeared.

And right beside her was that muscle-bound guy—Eric, was it? It seemed the boost I'd given him had paid off since they looked much closer now.

"Greetings, Dogeon-nim, and Hoyeon-nim. I'm saddened to bring unfortunate news, but my love..."

"Please don't say it! Eric, please...!"

I could already guess what he was about to say. No doubt it was about how she'd bombed the test.

"I know. Wasn’t it to be expected? Don’t be too downhearted, Eric. It couldn’t be helped."

"...It’s my fault. If I had been a bit more careful..."

"I-If you hadn’t called me in the first place, I would have been studying until the next day!"

As I spoke with them, I subtly observed Dogeon’s reaction. Even though he said he had given up, Anya was still the girl he once had feelings for.

But Dogeon really seemed unaffected. That only made me feel a little guiltier. I didn’t know what made him move on, but I was certain I had something to do with it.

"Well, in the end, you’re saying you didn’t study, Anastasia. So, how did you do?"

With a gentle smile, Dogeon’s words pricked at Anya.

But... the northern idiots weren’t the only ones; Dogeon’s room also had that smell. I couldn’t quite remember what it was, but it felt so familiar.

I was sure I had known it well, at least in my past life. What was it...

...Nope, still couldn’t remember. I gave up.

"Th-That is... um... so... ugh..."

Watching her mutter in a voice as small as a criminal confessing in court, one thought crossed my mind.

She hadn’t grown at all.

Dogeon, on the other hand, had grown so much. Feeling pleased, I playfully wrapped my tail around his hand. This made our bond even stronger than theirs.

Yeah. We won. I smirked as I evaluated Anya.

"Just a bit more effort, and you'll get there. It's a pity there's been no progress, though."

"Ugh... Why do I even have to study...?"

"My love, if you are to lead the North someday, you must at least do this much."

"Well... I guess so..."

I wasn't sure whether I should be happy or feel sorry for how much closer the two of them had gotten. Dogeon's complete indifference left me a bit unsettled.

...Well, it's good to let things be. She found her own love naturally. It's not like I forced them together.

"...Then, we'll be going now. We... have a meeting to attend. R-Right... Eric?"

"Of course!"

I could see through their little lie, but I let them go. They clearly wanted to leave, and there was no need to hold them back.

"Yes, take care."

Dogeon also let them go without fuss. Though, do people usually hold meetings in the dorms?

...Well, maybe they were just hosting a small party in their room. I let it go.

That aside, being stared at this much was starting to get uncomfortable. I gently tugged on Dogeon and whispered quietly.

"...Let's go somewhere. Anywhere but here."

There were just too many eyes watching us, whether I was hugging him or patting him.

"Then how about the botanical garden?"

"Sure."

Except for the upperclassmen dragging their half-dead selves around with reports in hand, no one ever went there. We set off toward the garden.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 97

97. Rough but Gentle

It was quiet. So quiet that it was hard to believe this was the academy right after exams. No wonder Dogeon had recommended this place.

However, if I listened closely, I could hear sounds more eerie and gloomy than the wails of the dead coming from all directions.

"The hypothesis... was wrong. I thought I had it this time..."

"Mana calibration results... mismatch. Aieee? Why? The conditions should have been the same! Abat? Ababat?"

The hopes, efforts, and time of the senior students crumbled with a sound softer than the rustling of leaves.

...Well, not my problem. The only thing I needed to worry about was staying quiet. There had been a sign at the entrance asking for silence.

Whether it was for the sake of those seniors or for the plants inside, I had no idea.

"Dogeon, doesn’t it feel a bit too quiet here...?"

I wanted a place with just the right amount of solitude, not this absolute silence.

"Really? I think it’s just right. It’s quiet, there’s a breeze. Isn’t it nice? I like it."

How could I say no when he looked so blissfully content? He seemed so at peace that I couldn’t bring myself to suggest going somewhere else.

"...Well. If you like it, then okay."

Dogeon might have found it peaceful, but to me, it felt more like a garden filled with despair. Every word from the seniors seemed to resonate with an intense sense of hopelessness.

Though none of their words were directed at me, just listening to them made me uncomfortable. I leaned closer to Dogeon.

He seemed a bit startled by my sudden closeness but quickly adapted and even took it a step further.

"...Is this okay?"

He smoothly wrapped his arm around my waist.

"Hih...?!"

The sudden warmth against my side caught me off guard. I didn’t dislike it, but it felt... ticklish.

"...Y-Yeah. Just... don’t move too much. It’s... ticklish."

Even just his hand being there made it hard to keep my lips from curling up. Laughing in this somber place seemed like a dangerous move.

...I wasn’t smiling because I liked it. My chest felt a bit fluttery, but that was probably because my body felt ticklish, and my mind was just following along.

"Aha... So your stomach is sensitive. Then... how about here?"

His hand shifted down to my hip.

...Well, it wasn’t ticklish. If he had asked whether I felt nothing, I would have definitely said no.

I looked at Dogeon, wondering if he had finally lost his mind, but he was just smiling at me with a playful glint in his eyes.

This guy... He was doing this on purpose, wasn’t he?

"You...!"

I tried to protest, but Dogeon just brought his finger to his lips, signaling for silence.

"You’ve been teasing me all this time. I’m not the type who just takes it lying down."

Had he really been holding that grudge this whole time? I thought he had let it go like a man... No, wait. He had always reacted immediately, hadn’t he?

I had a lot to argue about, but since I had brought this on myself and couldn’t make a scene, I had no choice but to keep my mouth shut.

Just you wait until we get out of here. I wasn’t going to let this slide. But before I could solidify my resolve, Dogeon began to throw my own past words back at me.

"Hoyeon, do you remember what you said before? That if I wanted to pet you, I just had to ask. Hoyeon, can I ‘pet’ you now?"

It seemed like he had chosen the botanical garden specifically to get back at me.

This wasn’t the time to worry about such details, but a man shouldn’t go back on his word. Though, technically, I was a girl right now, so maybe I could run away?

But it was something I had said as a friend. After a long internal struggle, I finally managed to respond.

"...Just you wait...!"

"I'll take my punishment willingly, Princess." Dogeon whispered as he slowly moved his hand.

"...Hngh."

I tried to focus on the anguished faces of the seniors, hoping it would help me pull myself together. Unfortunately, my body wasn't cooperating.

What had once not felt ticklish at all now did. His touch was surprisingly skillful, making it impossible to ignore or dismiss.

For some reason, my stomach felt tight. Why on earth was he doing this now?

"Is something wrong, Princess? Are you feeling unwell?"

Unlike Dogeon's barely audible voice, my breathing was growing louder.

I considered asking to go somewhere else, but that felt too humiliating. It would be like admitting defeat.

Even as I tried to get my thoughts in order, my body was steadily heating up. Still, I thought I could control it—I didn't think the worst would happen.

"Hyah...?!"

At least, not until Dogeon pressed firmly on the base of my tail.

***

Had I gone too far? As I watched Hoyeon let out a quiet moan, the thought briefly crossed my mind.

It seemed her soft sound had reached a few of the nearby seniors. Those who had been staring blankly at the trees like zombies turned their eyes toward us.

Their hunched postures and dead-eyed expressions gave me chills, but Hoyeon didn’t seem to notice.

The catnip had worked. Since she was feline-like, I had wondered if it might affect her—and it had worked even better than expected.

The way her expression crumbled for a brief moment told me all I needed to know.

"...D-Dogeon... not there...!"

Her voice trembled slightly as if she wanted to plead with me not to touch that spot. I couldn’t hear the rest of her words because a shiver of pleasure cut her off.

I wasn’t sure if she thought of the sensation as pleasure or as something unknown.

Did I really need to go this far? Was it necessary to rush things? Wouldn’t this just make her resist more?

And considering the watchful eyes on us, what I was doing wasn’t the smartest move.

Still, I knew best why I was acting this way.

It was because I was anxious.

Anya and Eric, who claimed they had no feelings for each other, ended up having their eyes and insides aligned. Cecilia and Ethan, who hadn't said anything yet, were already giving off a lover-like vibe.

And then there was Camilla and her friend and doormat, Exipri. Everyone was finding their own partner, and I couldn't help but wonder if Hoyeon would too.

If I hadn't met Anya and Eric during the day, I would have gone to a regular café or something.

She might not have noticed, but I could already tell that they had done it. So I was worried that Hoyeon might end up like that without me knowing.

That's why I came up with this idea: I'd rather be completely her with myself.

That was the only reason I was rushing things now.

"Hngh… Dogeon. Please… Please be gentle there… It feels strange…"

Seeing Hoyeon asking with teary eyes, I came to my senses a bit. Even if Hoyeon liked me, there would be a limit to what she could accept.

Wasn't what I was trying to do now crossing that line?

That thought made me feel like I was falling into ice water. Besides, with so many people staring at us, I had to stop.

Couples, I'm going to kill you.

I couldn't handle standing in front of people who were saying that with their eyes any longer.

"...Yes, Princess. Let's stop here. And please, stop teasing me so much. You've been going too far lately."

"Okayyy… I was wronggg…"

The gazes were becoming so hostile that it felt like they were going to dissect us if we showed any more affection, so I quickly dazed her and left the botanical garden.

And I waited for her to come to her senses. What I did just now could be considered a form of foreplay, so it would take some time.

…Saying it like this, I could quickly realize how dangerous what I did was. I openly caressed her in a public place.

I must have been crazy, Han Dogeon. It was fortunate that Hoyeon was ignorant; if she knew what she had just experienced, it wouldn't be strange if our relationship broke down immediately.

"...Haa, heuu… Uuu… Dogeon, you…! Apologize…!"

Hoyeon didn't know exactly what it was, but she knew she had been through something embarrassing, so she demanded an apology.

Of course, I should. It was practically outdoor play.

"I'm really sorry, Hoyeon. I think I went too far just now. I won't make excuses even if you're angry. I was wrong."

I sincerely apologized for my outrageous behavior.

I thought about bowing, but I didn't because I knew Hoyeon, who didn't like attracting attention, would hate it even more if I did that.

My sincere apology seemed to have worked, and she seemed to have calmed down to some extent. She took a deep breath as if to cool her head, and then she slowly opened her mouth.

"...Haa. So you do think you were wrong. Then, I'll let you make up for your sin by granting me one favor. If you don't like it, don't meet me for a week. What will you do?"

What would I do? There was no other option but the former. I was so anxious about being separated from her that I even made such a self-destructive move.

"Okay. What's your favor?"

"...So… That place you were caressing earlier… Could you, uh, caress it a little more gently…?"

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Thanks to stroking Hoyeon and cooling my head, I was able to think about the immediate problem. It wasn't an abstract problem like being hated by Hoyeon, who had regained her senses.

It was about a very realistic problem, perhaps so realistic that it was right in front of me.

Black Wolf, and Jeongho. I wasn't sure exactly when it started, but Black Wolf had been following me. I didn't know how he found me, as he was so well hidden that even Anya didn't notice.

Once I knew, I could see where he was if I concentrated all my attention. Even now, he was watching me from up in that tree.

He wasn't showing any emotion, so I wasn't sure if I was safe, but I probably was. At least as long as I was by Hoyeon's side.

"Heeuh… Hheueung… There…"

It was a good thing there were no prying eyes, as we were somewhere in a corner of the academy. Hoyeon was making pleasant noises like a purring cat, urging me to keep touching her.

I couldn't stop, but it was awkward to continue.

"...Do you like it that much?"

I was touching her because she asked me to, but Black Wolf's gaze was becoming increasingly burdensome. Even though he was nominally

Byeolbi's direct subordinate, Jeongho was still his superior, so I was afraid of the aftermath.

Even though his wife was clearly stronger than him, he kept taking care of her, and if anything happened to his daughter, he wouldn't stand still.

Just like I feared at the beginning of the semester, a real war might break out. Not because this continent was unfair, but because of me.

…Well, now that I've given up, a war will break out anyway. I wanted to delay it as much as possible, at least.

"Joah… This kind of thing… It's my first time… Grrr…"

A purring song… So beastkins might have stronger animalistic traits than I thought. It's like even these things are similar to the original animals.

Black Wolf's gaze became a little scarier, but… it'll be alright. I think so. But when I thought of Jeongho, I couldn't help but sigh again.

Passing the heroines to Black Wolf, passing Black Wolf to Jeongho. It was suffocating just to get this far, but if I passed Jeongho…

Byeolbi. Yes, she was surprisingly showing me favor. To be precise, she wasn't showing any animosity. Still, that was even more surprising.

In the original story, she was like a machine. A machine moving towards an unknown goal without favor or malice.

The reason she had something like a heart must be because of Hoyeon.

"...Heeeaeae… Heu. Feels good…"

Maybe things had already gone wrong before I entered the novel. I had a feeling that the original story had become distant from the moment Hoyeon was born.

…Well, it's a good story now. If I think optimistically, a war might not break out. But that's just wishful thinking.

"...Um, Hoyeon. Shouldn't we get going soon?"

After stroking her for 20 minutes like this, my wrist was starting to hurt. I was twisting and turning to control my strength, so it was starting to strain me, and I wondered how long I would have to keep doing this.

"Heueu… Ung, it's a shame…"

She was blatantly expressing her dislike, as she hated being disturbed while she was enjoying herself, but she reluctantly got up slowly. Thank goodness, my hand would have broken off if I had done it any longer.

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I was dragged to the cafeteria by Dogeon's hand. I was amazed that it was only lunchtime, but since I had originally spent my time in academy classes, it was only natural that it felt awkward now that it was ending early because of the exam.

…More than that, it felt much better than when my dad scratched my back before bed. I don't know why it felt so good, even though it was just the base of my tail.

It doesn't even tickle when I touch it while showering. Strangely, Dogeon's touch had the effect of tickling even places that shouldn't tickle.

…Well, people say that they react a little more sensitively to being touched by others than by themselves. It must be something similar to that. I'm in heat anyway, so it wouldn't be strange if my body became a little strange.

More than that. Now that Black Wolf no longer needs to monitor Dogeon, shouldn't I let him rest soon?

I sent a signal with my eyes to my brother, who was following me without being detected by anyone even while parting the crowd, that he could stop now.

For some reason, my brother, who likes to rest, rarely insisted on monitoring me more, but I firmly conveyed my intention to stop. It's also a

little petty to monitor a friend, and besides, there's no reason to monitor Dogeon anymore.

Because I made it that way.

There were many eyes watching, so I couldn't openly rub against him, but I maintained a subtle distance where our shoulders would touch.

My brother couldn't help but step back when I was so firm. Fortunately, I no longer needed to keep winking and look strange to Dogeon.

Now there were no prying eyes, or rather, no one I knew. There was no need to care about anyone. People wouldn't approach me anyway, so I ignored them.

I weakly intertwined my tail with his legs. I wanted to wrap it around him completely, but that was impossible unless I was a snake beastkin.

"...Um, Hoyeon. It's a little uncomfortable to walk, so could you untangle this…"

"Ung. No. I wrapped it around you so you wouldn't fall away from me on purpose. Walk according to me."

Dogeon always took care of his food first and then reserved a table in advance. It could be said that he was sensible, but today, such sense was not necessary.

All I needed was… you.

"...Okay. But don't take too long to choose."

Could it be that he disliked that so much that he forced me to choose quickly by securing a seat in advance? I can't just let this go.

So I took Dogeon around to look at the menu. I dragged out the time by visiting the seafood and dessert corners, which I wouldn't normally even glance at.

Dogeon seemed a little tired. Still, he's with the person he likes. Dogeon will definitely like it too.

In the end, I filled my plate with the same menu as always. Dogeon had an expression that said, 'If you were just going to get the same thing, why did you hold me back?' Hmm, was he not happy?

While eating in an awkward atmosphere, Dogeon suddenly looked at me. If you have something to say, just say it. Why do you have to give me pressure by looking at me like that?

"You have something on your face."

He said that and brought his hand to my mouth. Eh.

Wait a minute. Before I could protest, Dogeon brushed my mouth with his hand. I was thinking, why are you doing that with your bare hands, and why does it hurt to just tell me?

For some reason, my heart was pounding a little.

"...T-thank you. I don't know if you had to… but."

I didn't hate it. I was too embarrassed to say that out loud, so I swallowed the rest of my words. Because of that, my words came out a little strangely, but Dogeon seemed to understand perfectly.

I can tell by the way he's smiling so mischievously. I glared at him for a moment, but I couldn't deny that he had eased the atmosphere a little.

"...Haa. Okay, thank you. So, is there anything you want to ask me?"

The more I try to win, the more I lose. I accepted my defeat and asked Dogeon if there was anything he wanted to ask me.

He was asking me all sorts of things like a child whenever he had time. So it was obvious that he still had a question in his heart.

"After listening to your stories, I feel like the most important thing is missing. Is there no currency?"

I was wondering when he would ask that, but he's finally asking it now. Well, even I asked my parents if there was such a thing at first, so it's not strange that he's curious.

"Uh. There are ration tickets and stuff, but there's so much food and medicine that you can just take them whenever you need them."

"Then aren't there people who are greedy?"

"Why would they be greedy? Everything is already abundant, and there's no chance of running out in the future. Well, some people take a lot of 'happiness pills' or 'pills that expand the horizons of thought'…"

Mostly artists or scholars. Well, there's nothing else like that. After finishing the general explanation, Dogeon couldn't speak for a while, as if he was shocked.

"...So you don't need money. But aren't there people who have more than others…? Like you…"

Ah, that. Of course, landowners had a little more than ordinary people. But all of that was distributed or used as offerings.

As a result, the amount left over was only slightly more than others.

"Not really? Landowners and clansmen take more, but most of that is reserved for ancestral rites or feasts."

When he asked what the money I had was, I told him that I had brought money that foreign merchants had used and about three carts of gold bars that my parents had given me, and Dogeon understood and closed his mouth.

If he keeps asking me these questions, it's safe to say that he has feelings for me, right? Even my boring hometown would be fun if I was with him.

"...There's no money, but you do store those things."

"We don't need it in our country, but we need it when we trade with island countries."

Before I knew it, he had forgotten to eat and was just asking questions, so I pointed that out.

He came to his senses and ate the food that was gradually cooling down, so I scolded him to only eat when he was eating.

After finishing his food in an instant, Dogeon asked me something with a serious expression.

"...Um. Then finally. What is 'God'?"

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 99

99. Evil Thoughts

With countless fragments, shards of □□□ were falling. They were engulfed in flames as they entered the atmosphere, but not even a scorch mark would remain on them.

The moment □□□ detected an error, what □□□ had to do was clear. To eliminate the source of the error. Even if it was a tiny part, it was the same as excising the main body itself.

It was an organ created by using a part of the brain to understand intelligent beings who sometimes did incomprehensible things, so if □□□ excised it, there would be no way to recover it.

But □□□, who had identified emotion as the source of the error, did not hesitate.

□□□ immediately expelled the organ. However, in that fleeting moment, the small piece determined the direction it would be ejected as Earth.

The bystander must be a bystander to the end. So the fragment thought. It just had to not be a bystander. It just had to live as a resident of that star.

However, even as a fragment, its essence was still □□□, so it should not directly interfere with the ground.

If it did, it would be destroyed along with the star by the action rules engraved on the main body.

Answers that it did not achieve with its own hands had no meaning. It was a philosophy that a machine could not understand, but because it was a machine, it did not question it.

If so, let's set the stage and create tools. So that they can head down the right path on their own.

As the fragment scraped away its outer shell with the frictional heat of the atmosphere, it took the form of a creature on the ground. In this form, they would not be afraid either.

With a huge impact, the fragment collided with the ground. The fragment, which was not even damaged by that much, immediately looked up at the sky.

Watching the countless remnants fiercely rub against the atmosphere and burn away, leaving only afterglow, the fragment decided on its name.

It came on a day when countless stars fell like rain, so from now on, its name would be Onbyeolbi, not □□□.

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I thought I should have asked this a long time ago, but I felt like I couldn't hear it unless we got this close.

When I asked at the beginning of the semester, she openly avoided answering. It could be because we weren't acquainted.

"...Hmm. It's a bit complicated. Do you really want to hear it? Actually, I don't know exactly either, so it's hard to tell you exactly…"

I could tell how much she didn't want to talk about it, as Hoyeon, who was always excited to talk about her hometown, was rarely hesitant.

But to understand the East, I felt like I had to know for sure what it was. The word God came up every time she told me about it.

"I really want you to tell me. If it's hard to say, you can write it down, but… I want to hear it in your voice if possible."

It was a bit pathetic, but I persuaded Hoyeon with the words that it had to be you. It worked, and Hoyeon, blushing and twirling her hair, answered.

"...If you say that much, I'll tell you, but…? Ugh, it'll take too long to do it here…!"

Hoyeon said that and hurriedly started emptying her plate. Seeing that she didn't spill a single drop on her clothes even though she was eating hastily, I couldn't help but think that she was also a member of the imperial family.

She's a bit broken when we're alone, but she's clearly the heir to the Baek Empire.

Come to think of it, one question suddenly came to mind.

She eats more than Anya, so how come she doesn't gain any weight? As far as I know, she doesn't really exercise.

I thought it was normal at the beginning of the semester, but now I was really curious. But I thought it would be rude to ask, no matter how I thought about it.

…She's my friend, so it should be okay, right? I decided to casually ask about it once, using her health as an excuse since she only eats meat.

"...Um, Hoyeon. I don't think it's good for your health to eat so much meat. I'm really worried, so I'm asking. Are you okay?"

She was actually picking out the vegetables with uncanny precision. It's not my place to interfere, but it can't be good for her health to be picky.

"Not at all? I only need to eat vegetables once a month. And even this much meat isn't enough."

What did I just hear? Leaving aside the fact that she said she needed more even though she was eating so much meat, she doesn't need vegetables at

all.

"...Ah, that's right. It might seem a bit strange to you. Um, how should I put it. Beastkins… are better than you humans in many ways, but they use that much more energy. So this is a small meal."

Brain, circulatory system, muscles. Some chilling stories came out, so I just decided to nod. In short, her metabolism is more active than humans, so this is a very small meal.

I guess so. I can't tear her insides open like Georg, so I just have to accept it.

"Ah, I see."

"...What's with that lukewarm reaction? Don't you believe me?"

But Hoyeon didn't like that insincere answer, so she picked a fight and pushed me. After a long explanation that I believed her, we were finally able to go to her room.

"Euhm. So… where should I start explaining…"

After scratching her ear and swinging her tail around for a while, Hoyeon opened her mouth very slowly.

"...It would take more than one book to tell you everything, so I'll explain it a bit briefly. To put it simply, it's a kind of tool… at least the gods of this generation are."

This generation. So there was a previous generation too? When I asked about that, Hoyeon readily answered.

"Uh. So, back when beastkins were still human, my mother scattered artifacts like relics on the continent. You could gain divinity through them. She didn't tell me why she did that, but… my mother is recovering their divinity."

It was a complicated story. Maybe she's treating them as failures. I don't know her intention since she didn't say it herself.

"...Well, anyway, let's get back to the main point. The current gods have very clear purposes. Weather, harvest, wisdom, war… things like that. Instead… uh… they need, uh, sacrifices…"

Sacrifices. I had never heard of such a thing. I had never heard of such a background story even in the original story.

Because it was an enemy country. There was no reason to hear their circumstances or stories. It was quite strange to hear stories from a threat that I should have defeated if things had gone as planned.

"Sacrifices? Can you tell me more about that?"

"……Uh, so… There's no such thing as a free lunch in the world. Authority… requires a price. When you wish for abundance, you offer grain. When you wish for luck, you offer gold."

"...When you wish for victory, what do you offer?"

Hoyeon didn't answer. I had a feeling that something dangerous would happen if I asked any more, so I quietly closed my mouth.

There are some secrets that don't need to be dug up.

"...There are some who don't receive sacrifices. Like the god of medicine. Anyway… yeah. There's more to explain, but I'll just do this much for now. There's tomorrow's exam."

Hoyeon seemed to have a sore spot about that story, so she hurriedly started to change the subject. Actually, I've studied enough for now, but there was no reason to coldly leave, so I decided to hang out with her.

"Anya's not here, is that okay?"

I knew what she was doing right now, but I asked formally since she was one of her students.

"I don't think Anya can learn anything even if I teach her now…"

Seeing Hoyeon, who had lost her rigidity from earlier, complaining about Anya in a relaxed manner, I was secretly curious about one more thing.

"Do you know what Anya is doing right now?"

Does Hoyeon know? I was a little curious about that. She's very smart in many ways, but she doesn't seem to be at all in that way.

"...Isn't she partying?"

Uh. She doesn't work at all in that way. I was able to get a lot of good information.

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After all, the most difficult subjects were over, so all I did was ask Dogeon to stroke me a bit or spend time talking to him.

They were things I wouldn't have been able to do if Anya was there, but for some reason, she didn't show up even during lunch. The party must have been that fun. Those popular kids.

There were more than a few times when the conversation almost turned chilly, but fortunately, Dogeon noticed and skillfully avoided the landmines, so we were able to avoid such a situation.

"...Hehe, there. Just a little more…"

My back also felt much better than when my dad scratched it. The subtle tickling was now turning into an addictive shiver.

…I felt a strange, indescribable feeling, but I didn't care about that. Just scratch me a little more.

I'll do anything for you, talking, studying, anything, I hope the moment like now will continue forever.

But time is something that you can't hold on to, even if you try, so the end was coming after all.

"...It's already this late. I think we can barely make it in time for dinner if we go now. Shall we go?"

I didn't want to go out because I couldn't get stroked like this if I went outside. But I was also hungry, so I really had no choice but to get up.

I wouldn't have to move like this if Dogeon just came to my house.

I even thought about just dragging him away.

…Maybe it wouldn't be bad?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 100

Chapter 100

"You poor beast, who knows nothing of love."

The boy's eyes, as he gazed at the girl, were mixed with affection and fear. If his eyes were only for her, they would be filled with nothing but affection, but alas, the boy could not see only the girl.

Even though he had resolved to give up, the lingering attachment kept him to look straight at what was behind her.

In his eyes, there was something frightening because he couldn't understand its purpose, and something frightening because he knew its purpose, both looming behind the girl.

Even though their hands were clasped so warmly, the boy shuddered with cold.

“…Are you cold?”

The girl asked, puzzled, as she snuggled closer to the boy, but he evasively replied that he was just like this sometimes, as if embarrassed.

“Hmm… I see. I’ll keep you warm, though.”

The girl, content just to be by the boy’s side, rubbed her face against his shoulder without any suspicion.

If only she knew nothing. The boy secretly wished so. It wouldn't change anything, but if that were the case, he would at least feel less guilt.

“…Are you really okay with just eating meat?”

The boy threw a pointless joke at the girl to shake off his dark thoughts, but rather, the girl seemed tired of hearing it and struck the back of the boy's knees with her tail.

The girl, who caught the staggering boy from falling, retorted sharply, saying, ‘I know my body best’—to the boy.

Repeating what you’ve said invites violence. Engraving another piece of information, the boy decided not to bring up food anymore.

“In the first place, I’m a tiger, you know. Don’t you think it’s weird for a tiger to graze on grass?”

It’s not like you’re just picking out vegetables because you don’t want to eat them. The boy only thought the words that would invite a beating in his heart and agreed with the girl.

You think so too, right? Looking at the girl who was puffed up with pride, the boy smiled at how she could be so cute.

Because it was a secluded alleyway with no one watching, the man and woman could freely express their feelings to each other.

“…Hoyeon. Then, what do you think of me?”

Therefore, the boy decided to be a little bolder. He had confessed to the girl how he felt about her, so shouldn't he be allowed to hear it this time in return?

That was the thought behind the question. However, the girl seemed to have taken a direct hit and couldn't answer easily.

“W-Well, um… friends… no. Best friends…? No, we’re closer than that… Ugh… But… no, that doesn’t seem right… S-Sorry. I don’t know…”

The girl, as if she had received an unexpected question, kept repeating her answers, and then shyly replied that she didn't know.

“…Then, thinking of us as… lovers… is that too arrogant?”

The girl didn't know what to do at the boy's attitude of asking seriously, erasing his smile. Even though she had been seriously considering kidnapping him until just now.

In fact, the girl knew. That what she was doing was absolutely not something friends would do.

But the masculinity that remained as fragments was denying it. She tried to convince herself that if they were very close, it could be possible, and she tried not to admit it.

No, to be precise, she didn't know.

The fact that she liked the boy. She had never truly given her heart to anyone in her entire life, so she thought of this as just friendship.

But now that belief was shaking. Her heart was pounding, and her whole body was engulfed in heat, and she wanted to turn her head away right now, but the girl stared straight at the boy.

The reason was unknown to herself. She only entrusted herself to the intuition that told her not to run away.

“L-Lovers? So, um… loving… each other?”

The girl, who struggled to utter the word ‘love,’ blushed as if she would drown in embarrassment, but the boy calmly repeated her words.

“Yeah. Loving each other. Hoyeon. It might sound obvious, but I love you.”

I love you. The moment she heard those words, the girl thought something snapped inside her. But she had no time to think about what it was.

Because all her nerves were focused on that one word she had just heard. The boy conveyed his feelings to her in a way that was neither too heavy nor too light.

“Ugh… Ah…”

Perhaps because she had been confessed to so suddenly in an alleyway, the girl couldn't come to her senses. Actually, the place didn't matter.

It was her first time being loved by someone of the opposite sex, so even if she had been fully prepared, it would have been the same as now.

She would have been like this even if she was in her right mind, but since she was also in heat, it was fortunate that she was only this broken.

She repeated the word ‘love’ like a broken answering machine and barely regained her senses.

It was thanks to a question the boy threw at her.

“…How about you?”

It was short, but it was perfect for regaining her senses. The girl knew what she had to say. She had crushed even the slightest sense of resistance, but there was only one reason why she couldn't bring herself to say it.

Because she was shy.

“…I, I also… l… l-love you…!”

Having barely resolved to do it big since she was already committing the act, she finally responded to the boy's confession in a voice as small as an ant crawling.

But that was enough for the boy. Regaining his usual smile, the boy tried to ease her tension with a playful voice.

“Really? That’s a relief. I thought I was the only one who loved you.”

“That can’t be!”

As the gravity disappeared, the shyness and embarrassment she had been suppressing burst out at once, and the girl screamed.

“…Ugh. How could that be? Apologize quickly.”

Even though it may have been a joke to him, it was a colder remark to the girl than any other words. The girl demanded an apology because she was so surprised that she only realized it was a joke after seeing the boy's expression.

There was no reason to resist, so the boy obediently bowed his head to the girl in apology.

“…T-Then… if you’re sorry… you’ll do something for me, right…?”

The girl fidgeted, twitching her ears and wrapping her tail around her legs as if she was troubled. What is she going to ask for this time? The boy was secretly anticipating.

However, what the girl asked for far exceeded the boy’s expectations.

“I-If you’re sorry… um… Ki… kiss me.”

The girl, who seemed to be dying of embarrassment for suggesting it, closed her eyes and pouted her lips, her face flushed.

The boy, who couldn't even dare to predict what kind of logical leap there had been this time, slowly headed towards the girl.

“…Since it’s the first time. Be gentle…”

Something stirred within the boy, but neither the boy nor the girl noticed it. The boy simply slowly pressed his lips against the girl's lips.

The boy thought it was the same texture as he had imagined, but he had no intention of stopping there. The boy bit her upper lip.

The girl was slightly surprised by the sudden movement, but soon bit the boy's lower lip.

Thus, they were only kissing for a time that was short for the boy and long for the girl.

And the boy decided to take it one step further.

"…?!"

The girl could feel the boy's tongue slowly but surely forcing its way into her lips.

What is he doing? In the girl's knowledge, a kiss was just about touching lips. She didn't know about this.

But she felt that she didn't dislike it. Eventually, when his tongue entered her inside, the girl shyly and clumsily went out to meet him.

Would she accept it? She asked herself dozens of times in her mind, enjoying the soft and rough sensation of his tongue touching hers.

Cats have thorns on their tongues, so Hoyeon must have them too. But since it wasn't enough to cause injury, the boy intertwined his tongue with hers.

The girl was embarrassed but accepted the boy's movements.

At first, she was just reluctantly going along, but as time went on, the girl actively intertwined her tongue.

Even though they were just rubbing their tongues together, the girl was feeling ecstasy along with a strange sensation that made her whole body tingle and melt away.

This time, they licked every corner of each other's tongues, and only stopped kissing when they were slightly out of breath. The boy also felt that it was long.

“…Chyuha, haa… Heueu… You said to be gentle… since it’s the first time…”

It sounded like a resentful remark, but no resentment could be found in the girl's gaze and tone towards the boy.

Rather, her breath contained sex appeal.

“…Sorry. I went too far.”

The boy couldn't dare to meet her gaze.

They were heading to the dormitory without saying anything as if they had promised, but both the girl and the boy seemed to have uncomfortable steps.

The boy wanted to go into his room. His body was screaming not to stop, but he couldn't bring himself to do so because he knew what was behind her.

To that extent, her parents were the very definition of fear for him.

However, the girl grabbed the sleeve of his robe as he tried to enter his room.

Looking at her who was just sending a silent gaze without saying anything, he was constantly weighing fear and instinct.

“…Are you just going to leave like this…?”

And the scale tilted towards instinct due to her one word.

The boy entered the girl's room instead of his own.

Even though he knew it would get dirty anyway, the boy went to the bathroom saying he would take a shower. After taking off his clothes and showering in cold water, he thought of his old friends.

The guys who were crazy about women and threw their lives into the abyss. He used to wonder why they would do such foolish things, but now he could understand them.

If it was this kind of ruin, it might not be so bad.

What greeted him after he had cooled his head a little was the girl sitting on the bed wearing only her underwear.

Her lower body was already slightly wet, and she wore black underwear that contrasted with her milky white skin, which she usually didn't show to anyone. Her neatly folded clothes, which the boy had praised, were placed right next to her, and she was glancing at the boy, her face flushed with an emotion that was either shame or anticipation.

Thanks to that, the boy's body, mind, and thing were all heated up, and he sat next to her.

"…Hoyeon."

"…Yeah. Dogeon."

There was no need to confirm if she really wanted to do it. Sitting facing each other, the boy gently stroked her back.

The girl reacted sensitively to the different sensation compared to stroking over clothes.

"…Heut. Eue, heueu… Haa…"

Every time the boy's hand brushed against the girl's back, she let out a moan mixed with coyness.

As soon as he judged that he had stroked her enough, the boy slowly directed his hand towards her chest.

The girl turned her head slightly, but she didn't refuse his touch. The boy was heated up by the firm and soft sensation that could be felt even through her underwear.

The boy slowly massaged her breasts, which were slightly small and overflowing in his hand. The girl also moaned more and more in response, panting heavily.

“…Haa, Dogeon… Quickly…”

As soon as the girl's permission was given, the boy slowly took off her top. When he pulled the ribbon on the front, her breasts, which had been slightly pressed down, were fully revealed.

The boy unknowingly gave a slight force and grabbed the girl's breasts. Seeing the shape change as he applied force, the boy's thing was already at its limit.

The girl swallowed as she looked at the boy's thing that had pushed out of his pants. At first, she had mistaken it for a leg or thigh, so she wondered how big it was.

…Heu, it's that big. That kind of thing… inside here…

There was a slight fear, but more than that, her crotch was getting wet with anticipation and ecstasy.

The boy, who was touching her breasts like a child, placed his hand on the girl's thigh while holding one hand as it was.

The boy, who saw the girl's bottoms, judged that there was no need to do it long this time, and slowly moved his hand to her pelvis.

“…Haa, Haeuk…”

This time, permission wasn't given, but she didn't seem to have the mind to give permission. In the first place, she had already agreed, so the boy took off the girl's bottoms without hesitation and threw off his own bottoms.

“…Hoyeon. I’m going in.”

“Heut… Yeah, co… come on…”

He slowly inserted his thing into her hole, which she had already spread her legs while lying down.

“…Eue…Aaa…Heua, Aaa…!”

Even though she had loosened her body with a long caress, it was her first time receiving a man, so the girl let out a moan full of pain.

However, the boy could no longer maintain his reason.

Even though her membrane was torn and a little blood came out, the boy quickly slammed his thing into the girl's crack, unlike before.

“…A, Eueue…Eua… Aeuk… Dogeon…ah…”

The girl felt like something would really pop out of her mouth. She was feeling pain from the foreign sensation filling her stomach and the rapid expansion.

She called out the name of her mate and endured the pain by digging her fingernails into his back to the point where blood was forming. She felt another sensation spreading from her stomach.

It was pleasure.

As her thing fully accepted his thing, the pleasure grew more and more in her stomach every time his thing rubbed against her wall.

I feel like I’ve felt this somewhere before. The girl, panting in pleasure at the increasingly rough movements of her mate, rolled her head, which wasn't working.

Ah, that's right.

“…Hoyeon, Hoyeon…!”

The sound of flesh hitting each other echoed in the quiet room, and her head became more and more dull.

“…Heu-eut, Haang…Dogeon…!”

At the first heat—

“Euek… I’m going to… cum… inside…!”

At that moment when her mate trembled and shoved it into the girl's hole all the way to the root.

The girl's memory was cut off there.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 101

Chapter 101: Aftermath

The girl woke up earlier than the boy.

The chilly morning air touched her skin, making her shiver for a moment, but thanks to that, she regained her senses and began to recall what had happened.

‘…So, Dogeon was inside me…’

Ah. Right. The girl remembered that she was still naked and that there was something she had to do right away.

More importantly, she felt like she had forgotten something important. Well, it didn't matter, did it?

As she was about to put on the underwear she had thrown aside, the girl saw the lukewarm liquid flowing down her crotch, and the memories of last night gradually returned.

Not satisfied with just the first act, she left it all to her instincts and did it two, three times…

Since her heat had ended and her mind was quite clear, the girl couldn't handle the shame that was washing over her. In the end, she had held hands with him, whispered love, and rode him.

She didn't regret rolling around with him, but she regretted falling asleep like that without cleaning up.

It must have been quite intense. Looking at the stains of liquid and blood on the bed, she wiped away the flowing liquid with a tissue.

I don't know much, but I should wipe it off for now, right? Wait. Blood? Looking at the dark red marks, she replayed what had happened.

There was so much of it that it couldn't have come from her.

The girl's gaze turned to the boy. And what came into her eyes was the boy's appearance, scratched and bitten all over.

The girl silently licked her fangs slightly. She tasted a slight hint of blood.

…I need to apologize for this. The strange magic power probably doesn't even recognize this as an injury and is slacking off, asleep inside his body.

This time, the girl finally put on her underwear, covered the boy with the blanket, and rummaged through the pile of luggage.

Not books, the knives her father told her to take were just heavy, and she threw away the pictures she didn't know why she had put in. She definitely put it somewhere here.

As she rummaged through the junk, the girl was finally able to find what she was looking for.

From a pouch containing various medicines, the girl took out a pink pill. When her mother gave it to her, she couldn't understand the intention at all, but the girl thought she knew now.

My mother had it all figured out. She swallowed what is commonly called a morning-after pill.

It's safe if you take it within 24 hours. The girl didn't dislike children, but she didn't want one now. There was also the matter of her heart, and she thought it should be after they had a ceremony.

“…Eue, what time is it…”

Hearing the sound of the girl moving busily, the boy belatedly woke up. Groaning at the pain sent by his area that had forcibly risen rather than his battered body, he immediately regained his senses at the strange sensation on his back.

“It’s ointment. Stay still. You’ll get scars if you’re not careful.”

The boy was excited by the girl's touch and her disheveled voice, but at the same time, he was begging inwardly for it to calm down because of the pain that felt like it would explode.

Even though his body was strengthened with magic, he had been pushed to his limit last night, so the boy was suffering from his little friend rising again.

“…Eueuk.”

“…Sorry. I didn’t know I had that kind of habit… That… I know that not knowing doesn’t excuse everything… Will you forgive me…?”

At the girl's words, the boy only groaned softly and nodded.

However, the boy, who couldn't bring himself to face the girl, turned his head when it was time to face her. Enjoying the touch he felt on the back of his neck while calming down his little friend, he felt his blood run cold the moment he saw the clock.

The hour hand was telling him it was 8 o'clock. On top of the fear of what would happen to Jeongho and Heukrang in his heart, and what the East would be like, a new and concrete fear was added.

“…Hoyeon. I appreciate it, but I think I need to get dressed right now. Look at the clock.”

The girl's blood also ran cold.

***

It was already too late when I remembered what I had forgotten, so showering or anything like that was impossible. At best, I could only put some bandages on my neck and quickly wash my face.

My clothes were a bit wrinkled, but I thought I should be confident in this kind of situation. If I act openly and brazenly, no one will say anything.

…But, I still hesitated to open the door and go in. Anyone with a brain would immediately realize that we ‘did it.’ Is it really okay to do that?

Also, there was still some left inside, and I felt like it would flow out if I wasn't careful. No one would notice, but the mere possibility of it was too much.

Dogeon seemed to be hesitating as well, and couldn't bring himself to step forward. Should we just run away?

But a line from a manga came to mind. There is no paradise at the end of running away—or something like that.

“…Let’s go.”

“Should…we?”

I took a deep breath and opened the door. Everyone's eyes turned to us.

From the homeroom teacher who was handing out the test papers in the front, to the flustered-looking church people, the girls who were turning their heads away as if embarrassed, and the men who were staring at us with wide eyes.

…So what? What I've learned for sure while living in the Academy is that there's no one who can dare to say anything to me.

Except for Georg. That person is definitely crazy. How can you do a live experiment, even if a student asks you to?

“…U-Um, Hoyeon… student-nim. And Dogeon student. Um, why… were you… late…?”

The homeroom teacher greeted us with an attitude that was neither strong nor submissive, but somewhere in between.

I don't completely understand. I know roughly how embarrassing it is for a teacher to be submissive to a student.

A one-year-old brat told me to call him hyung, so I threw my resignation letter and just left.

That's why I felt a little sorry for the homeroom teacher.

"…We overslept."

"I also overslept and was late. I'm sorry, Professor Dorothy."

It was a blatant lie. The homeroom teacher also couldn't manage her expression for a moment and looked at us with an expression that seemed to ask if we were serious.

"…I-I see. From… next time onwards, take thorough care of yourselves so that this kind of unfortunate event doesn't happen…"

Even while trembling, he said everything he had to say, showing a great sense of responsibility for his work. I'm sorry. We fell in love and couldn't help it.

…Still, it was good.

I erased the faint smile from the corner of my mouth and sat down in my seat. If I sent a glare to those who were still glancing at us, they would crawl in on their own.

Except for the church guys. Those guys avoided eye contact but didn't stop observing us. I felt bad, but I couldn't get angry after being late, so I stayed quiet.

The test was easy as expected. A little bit flowed out during the test, so I was nervous, but it wasn't enough to interfere.

“…Really, you worked hard. Dogeon.”

I told him he had worked hard, including last night. There's still the physical test left… There was such a thing during the midterm exam, so this time it's being conducted safely indoors, so there shouldn't be any big problems.

“…Yeah.”

Dogeon answered a bit perfunctorily, but I decided not to make an issue of it because he looked like he was really tired to death. It was a bit strange that he wasn't using that strange magic power.

“…That, pseudo-magic… or something. Aren’t you using that?”

I asked because I was curious as to why he was leaving aside such a convenient thing, since I had seen him almost die from fatigue before and then suddenly become fine with that.

“…There’s that too, but I just want to sleep.”

Ah. I think I knew what he meant. So I should just send him to his room obediently. His steps were so weak that I felt like I was supporting him.

I’ll let you off today.

***

Cecilia and Ethan were sitting close to each other with serious expressions at the cafe. The reason was, of course, what had happened between Hoyeon and Dogeon.

“…Ethan. That… Hoyeon and Dogeon, they… did it… right?”

Cecilia, who was only weak to men and not ignorant, accurately figured out what had happened between them.

Disheveled clothes and an uncomfortable gait. And a tired face as if they hadn't slept properly, and even the smell.

It was more difficult to not know. Ethan was seriously contemplating what the intention behind it was, not to mention the rumors that were already spreading.

What was she thinking when she did that? No matter how much he racked his brain, there was only one conclusion that came out of his head.

“…Yeah. They did it. And I think she's trying to show off. To say, ‘He's mine.’”

Ethan was able to come to that conclusion because he had captured even the faint smile on her face. That she was showing off to everyone.

Then what does she get from showing off?

“Showing off…? But there's no benefit to be gained from doing that…”

Ethan also thought Cecilia's opinion was valid. There was nothing to gain from showing off. Unless she just wanted to attract the attention of those around her.

Besides, she hardly cares about the eyes of others, so there was no reason for her to suddenly do that, so Ethan was racking his brains.

“…Kkeueung. I really don't know. Cecilia. Do you have any guesses?"

“Me? Well… After doing it, they really overslept… So they were in such a hurry to come that it turned out like that…?”

Then everything makes sense. If they just said they were late because they were in a hurry, there would be nothing strange, but Ethan, who didn't think they would make such a basic mistake, missed the truth even though it was right in front of him.

“…That's plausible, but I don't think they would make such a basic mistake.”

“Yeah, right…? I didn’t think it was right either. Then… what on earth is it…”

“…That’s what I’m saying.”

In the end, they were just wasting time sipping on their drinks.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 102

Chapter 102: The Sleeping Prince

“…You’re still sleeping.”

I pressed my ear against the wall, but all I could hear was Dogeon’s breathing. The next room was quiet, as if Yeonho had fallen into a deep sleep along with him.

…Hmm. Should I wake him up now?

I hadn’t disturbed him at lunchtime since he was sleeping so soundly, but skipping dinner as well didn’t seem like a good idea. If I left him alone, he might end up sleeping until the next day.

I guess I have no choice. I’ll have to go wake him myself.

Marking my place in the novel I was reading, I set the book aside and put on some clothes. I should probably write in my journal soon… Well, I can do that later.

But dinner isn’t something you can put off.

I knocked on his door out of courtesy, but there was no response. So, I just opened it and stepped inside.

The first thing I saw was Yeonho—who was still afraid of me—and Dogeon, fast asleep in his school uniform.

Then, a subtle scent of blooming nightflowers filled the air.

Until yesterday, I couldn't remember what the smell was, no matter how hard I tried. But now, I didn't even need to think about it.

…Now that I think about it, he really is a guy.

I wasn't sure whether the feeling washing over me was disappointment or just the realization that, in the end, he was human like everyone else.

Not that I was saying anything bad… but to think I lost to a mere hand.

I should get myself together.

Resolving myself, I started searching around his room.

At one point, Yeonho started pestering me for food, so I poured some kibble for him—though I did give him a little scare since I didn't like his attitude.

Dogeon's room was cluttered with all sorts of things. Problem sets I had given him, random gifts he might have prepared for another girl, scattered sheets of paper… and stiffened tissues.

He really didn't seem to have any talent for tidying up. His finishing touches were sloppy, and even important things were just strewn about. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd lost an assignment somewhere in the mess and couldn't find it later.

Maybe I should help him.

Deciding to wait for him just a little longer, I started cleaning his room.

I threw the used tissues into the trash, carefully placed the workbooks I had given him onto the bookshelf, and straightened up other things here and there. Even with all the noise I was making, Dogeon remained in a deep, unmoving sleep.

How is he even going to survive without me?

Forgetting that I was partly to blame, I looked down at his face.

Compared to before, the traces of distress and exhaustion had faded, making him look much better.

I wasn't sure what had been resolved, but… I hoped he could live without worries from now on.

With that wish in mind, I called his name.

"Dogeon. Wake up. It's already dinnertime. You need to eat. Hey, wake up…!"

I tried speaking right next to his ear, shaking him, and even rubbing his nose with my tail, but he wouldn't wake up.

…Isn't he sleeping too deeply?

I even considered slapping his cheeks a few times, but that seemed a bit much.

Now, what do I do? I can't just leave him like this.

Then, a certain fairy tale came to mind.

Sleeping Beauty.

I had forgotten most of the story, but there was one thing I remembered. The princess woke up after a kiss from a prince.

Or was that Snow White?

Well, same difference. It didn't really matter.

Still, I wanted to be sure.

Of course, I hesitated for a moment.

After insisting for so long that we were just friends, now I was about to give him a wake-up kiss?

But… it should be fine, right?

We weren't just friends anymore. We were lovers now.

There was nothing weird about it.

Yeah. No problem.

Once I made up my mind, it was easy to act.

I brushed his hair to one side so it wouldn't get in the way and positioned myself beside the bed.

If I climbed on, it might shake too much.

The last thing I wanted was for him to wake up just before our lips touched, making things awkward.

After all, it would be the worst if the mood was ruined.

Up close, he looked so peaceful and happy that I almost wanted to let him sleep a little longer.

But no. He had to eat.

He was still growing, after all.

So, skipping meals was absolutely not an option.

Still, being this close to his face made me feel a little embarrassed.

I'd done things even more intense than this before, so why was my heart still racing?

"…Wake up, my prince."

Hoping he would wake soon, I pressed my lips to his.

***

“Oh? Cecile. And Ethan. It feels like it’s been a while. Have you been well?”

Their meeting was purely coincidental.

Though they all studied under Hoyeon, they weren’t particularly close.

Ethan was briefly taken aback by the sudden encounter, but he soon returned her greeting.

“It hasn’t been that long, but… yes. It’s good to see you, Lady Anastasia. And you as well, Eric.”

“It’s been a while! Have you already eaten?”

Unlike Ethan, Cecilia cheerfully responded to Anya’s greeting and asked if they were on their way somewhere.

“We just finished eating. What a shame. If we had timed it better, we could have dined together.”

“Is that so…? Well, we can always meet up another time!”

With her characteristic optimism, Cecilia was about to bid them farewell.

However, Ethan had something to ask.

“Pardon me, Lady Anastasia, but have you heard the rumors about Lady Hoyeon?”

“…Ah, if you mean what happened today…”

“Yes. Lady Hoyeon normally wouldn’t behave like that. Do you have any idea why?”

Since Anya was close to Hoyeon, Ethan hoped she might have answers that he didn't.

"…Hmm."

Though not to the extent of Dogeon, Anya knew a fair bit about Hoyeon's true nature.

It wasn't hard to guess what had happened.

Most likely, just like what she and Eric had done before… Hoyeon and Dogeon had overslept after getting up to something.

However, Anya couldn't bring herself to say it out loud.

She didn't want to tarnish her friend's reputation in such a way.

Sometimes, it was better for certain truths to remain hidden.

Knowing how hard Hoyeon tried to appear flawless in front of others, Anya decided to keep quiet.

"I'm not sure. This is the first time I've seen her act like that as well…"

"I see. Apologies for keeping you. Have a good evening."

"You too, Ethan. Take care."

After casting a brief, concerned glance at his fingers and eyes, she quickly hurried back to Eric's side.

"…So, even she doesn't know."

"Don't worry, Ethan. It's not that big of a deal. More importantly, we should focus on the mystery of the World Tree at the academy."

They had been investigating the World Tree that had rejected their child.

Though they felt like they were forgetting something, they dismissed it as a minor lapse—since they had been so busy lately.

However, unlike their small worries, the enigmatic World Tree, which was somehow thriving in an inhospitable environment, was a real problem.

It wasn't something they could ignore.

But, much like their investigation into Hoyeon, they weren't making any progress.

"We'll be visiting my homeland soon for our field trip. Let's ask the elders then. They might know something."

"Yes. I expected this to be difficult, but… the more we dig, the harder it gets."

Frustrated by the ever-multiplying problems, Ethan let out a deep sigh.

"After hardship comes joy. The goddess bestows blessings on those who strive."

I hope that's true.

Muttering to himself, Ethan closed his eyes.

"Ethan, look."

Suddenly, Cecilia's quiet voice made him open them again.

She was pointing at something.

There, walking together, were Hoyeon and Dogeon.

They held their breath, observing them.

At first glance, they seemed to be walking side by side.

But if one looked closer, it was clear—Hoyeon was leading Dogeon.

“…You’re saying there’s nothing you want to eat?”

“Yes, ma’am. I just woke up, and all I can think about is crawling back into bed.”

“Hmm. I understand how you feel, but I won’t allow it. Skipping meals is unacceptable. Now, I’ll personally serve your food. Come here. Hup.”

Ethan could only imagine how much Dogeon had suffered under Hoyeon as he watched her coax and drag along his sluggish figure.

“Lady Hoyeon, that’s the seafood section…”

“I know. But I’m not the one eating it—you are. So don’t worry. Ugh, the smell.”

Hoyeon then began piling various items onto Dogeon’s plate—oysters, seaweed, eel.

Meat, chives, roasted garlic, eggs, and so on.

Her choices were very telling.

Dogeon let out a bitter smile.

“…Lady Hoyeon, I’m not really fond of chives… Couldn’t I have something else instead?”

“You do realize that being picky about food is bad, right? How do you expect to build up strength if you only eat greens?”

“And yet, Lady Hoyeon, you avoid seafood yourself.”

“…Tsk. Annoying brat.”

With a hint of irritation, Hoyeon grabbed a few pieces of seafood and placed them on her own plate.

Seeing this, Dogeon let out a chuckle and said to her,

“Alright, alright. I’ll try. Why not.”

Ethan silently observed the two.

At one point, his eyes met Hoyeon’s, but she merely acknowledged him and let them be.

After all, they weren’t even capable of being obstacles.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 103

Chapter 103: Awakening

“Good to see you all, everyone. Due to the tragic incident during the midterm exams, this time, the physical education test will be conducted indoors for safety.”

At Georg’s words, the atmosphere in the room grew heavy.

Our group wasn’t particularly affected, so there wasn’t much of a change in mood.

Well, at least for Hoyeon.

She didn’t so much as twitch an eyebrow, looking as if she was simply wondering when this would be over.

“…Haaahm. I don’t get why humans always add unnecessary remarks.”

Though she had spoken quietly enough that no one around could hear, she let out a yawn and openly revealed her thoughts.

Well, technically, she wasn’t human—she was an elf.

But I supposed in Hoyeon’s eyes, there wasn’t much difference.

“People are always curious about why things happen. Maybe that’s not the case in your homeland, but still.”

"…We're curious too, you know? Like… how the stars move, or how to make chunks of metal fly in the sky… things like that."

That's… a bit different, don't you think?

Seeing her kick at the dust on the floor instead of responding, I figured she had no real counterargument.

"…Hmm. In your homeland, are there no people who ever question the will of the gods or rulers?"

I could already guess the answer from what she had told me before, but hearing it directly from her would be more informative.

"…Why would they question it? If you just follow them, everything works out smoothly."

There wasn't the slightest hint of discomfort in her voice.

Only pure curiosity.

That was a relief, in a way—but at the same time, a little bitter.

So she wouldn't even consider questioning absolute authority.

Then again, if someone provided me with a perfectly structured schedule, I probably wouldn't question it either.

"I see… Oh, look over there. They're demonstrating what we'll be doing."

It seemed they were being extra cautious this time. There were no direct competitions.

Hoyeon still didn't seem particularly interested, but since the instructor was explaining, she at least paid enough attention to listen.

"…Obstacle run, long-distance running, pull-ups… What is this? Are they that scared? Sure, things went badly last time, but… this feels overly passive. I wonder if they can even properly assess us like this."

I found myself agreeing, but I also understood why they were so cautious.

The reason the academy could treat students equally was because of a treaty.

And that treaty included a clause guaranteeing student safety.

The complaints from the parents must have been overwhelming.

And these weren't just any parents—they were all high-ranking figures.

Even the academy couldn't ignore that kind of pressure.

…Come to think of it, the Eastern faction wasn't included in that treaty.

Well, it made sense.

They were a virtual enemy nation, so there was no reason to include them in the treaty.

And neither side was going to send an envoy to negotiate it either.

That must be why the teachers couldn't exert much control over Hoyeon.

Aside from Georg, the rest of the instructors seemed to be accommodating her more than anything.

"Well, thanks to that, the test will be easy for us. No complaints here."

"If you say so… then I guess that's that."

As I chatted idly with Hoyeon, students began gathering on the track for their turn to run.

They had at least considered fairness—students who practiced mana breathing techniques were grouped together, while regular students had their own category.

And their scores were graded separately.

It seemed they had gone to great lengths to ensure that regular students wouldn't feel discouraged.

That being said, there were always outliers—people who, no matter whom they were grouped with, would make everyone feel inadequate.

For example, Anya, standing right next to me.

Eric was here too, but even in the original story, he had never been able to match Anya's level.

Once again, I found myself in awe of her sheer physical prowess.

"Oh? Lady Hoyeon! And Sir Dogeon. Fancy seeing you two here…?"

But the real surprise was Hoyeon.

I understood why I wasn't placed with the regular students—I had used mana breathing before.

But Hoyeon had never shown any sign of it.

"…Hmm. Feels like I see you too often."

She seemed just as confused as I was about her placement.

Still, seeing a familiar face seemed to snap her out of her daze.

"Participants, take your positions."

But Georg wasn't going to give us time for idle chatter.

He quickly urged us to get into place.

Hoyeon tossed her outer coat onto the grass beside the track and got into position.

I wondered how she was planning to run in that outfit, but… well.

She'd figure it out.

"Ready… Start!"

And with Georg's command, everyone shot forward like the wind.

***

"…Huff… Huff… Lady Hoyeon. Are you actually a mana breathing user?"

"No."

While everyone else was left panting and drenched in sweat after the test, Hoyeon didn't have so much as a single drop on her.

Her speed was only mid-tier—even slower than mine.

But that just meant she had managed to outrun weaker mana users without using any breathing techniques at all.

What she did display was ridiculous endurance.

Even through the obstacle course, long-distance run, and pull-up test, she never once seemed tired.

So that's why she could push me so mercilessly.

"Hahh… Hahh… I see… Your stamina is no joke…"

Even Anya, who was a monster in her own right, had been exhausted by the time she got to pull-ups.

Did Hoyeon even have a limit?

For the first time, I felt real concern for my future.

"…Sigh. So, my love isn't the only thing I lack compared to others. This is quite the rare sight, Lady Hoyeon."

“What’s that supposed to mean?! Are you saying my intelligence is lacking? The one with the real issue here is you!”

“My love… This is something even I cannot overlook…”

As Eric and Anya bickered, I felt both amused and slightly bitter.

“…Dogeon. Why are you staring so intently? Are you jealous?”

At some point, Hoyeon had silently crept closer and was now warming my side with her presence.

“…Not jealous, exactly. Or—actually, yeah. I guess I am.”

I tried to find a different word but gave up.

I had Hoyeon by my side, so there was nothing to be jealous of.

But humans were greedy creatures who always wanted more.

“…I see. Then, pet me.”

Hoyeon said this while placing her tail in my hands.

I hadn’t asked, but I appreciated the gesture.

It was kind of funny how she offered it like she was doing me a favor.

Still, we were in public, so I had to be mindful of others.

As I absentmindedly stroked her tail, I found the texture fascinating.

Smooth and silky when I stroked in one direction, but rough and bristly—almost like touching a hedgehog—when I stroked in the opposite.

The only difference was that it wasn’t sharp enough to hurt.

She seemed to prefer the smoother strokes.

Whenever I brushed against the grain, she'd flick her tail lightly as if telling me to stop.

But the rough texture had a strangely addictive feel to it.

I felt bad, but I couldn't help myself.

At first, her tail only twitched slightly.

But as I kept going, it began to swish more and more aggressively—until I finally gave in and stroked it the way she wanted.

That's when I realized something.

The background noise—the childish argument between Anya and Eric—had gone silent.

When I glanced up, I found them both staring at us.

Faces flushed red.

"…A-Ah, no. We weren't trying to spy or anything…"

"…Ahem."

At some point, they had stopped fighting and were just… watching.

Was this really that unusual?

I turned to Hoyeon—and immediately understood.

"…Hnn."

Her cheeks were tinged pink, and her breath was laced with something dangerously suggestive.

It didn't take me long to realize it was because of how I had been stroking her tail.

“…My apologies, Lady Hoyeon. I’ll stop—”

“Keep… Hnn… going.”

It seemed I had flipped a dangerous switch.

***

Where… am I?

She opened her eyes to an unfamiliar place.

Her body, still sluggish and unresponsive, barely obeyed her will as she forced herself into a sitting position.

Her mind remained hazy as she struggled to recall what had happened.

Right… After invoking the goddess… that wretched girl…

That’s right. What happened to Stefania?

Attempting to stand, she was suddenly struck by dizziness and swayed.

That was when she realized multiple tubes were connected to her body.

She was about to rip them off, finding them an annoyance, when she saw a familiar face enter the hospital room.

"Ena, you’re awake!"

"Ethan, where were you running off to in such a hurry…? And that person…?"

"…My head is pounding. Please speak a little quieter, Decatria."

Dragging along some strange elf was one thing, but there was something far more pressing on Gloria’s mind.

Shaking off her grogginess, she focused on Ethan and asked,

"More importantly, what happened to Stefania? Decatria?"

She didn’t ask how much time had passed.

Her first concern was what had happened to her enemy.

Ethan found himself admiring her resolve as he answered without hesitation.

"She has disappeared. A large amount of blood was discovered in her room, so we believe she is dead."

I see. Good.

Yet, for some reason, an uneasy feeling lingered in her chest.

She had nearly killed Stefania with her own hands, and yet…

A foreboding sense crept into her mind, whispering that she might still be alive.

"…Is that so."

"You have been asleep for several months. Please do not overexert yourself and rest."

"…What? Several months? And just who exactly is this…?"

"…I see… In that case, perhaps I should rest for a while."

As Cecilia’s doubts continued to pile up, the apostles carried on their conversation.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 104

Chapter 104: So Dishonest

For the past few days, I hadn't seen the church bastards around.

They still attended classes without fail, but the moment lessons ended, they vanished—like ghosts that had suddenly lost interest in tailing me.

Since they were terrible at hiding, there was no way I simply hadn't noticed them.

Which meant they must have had other business elsewhere.

I didn't particularly care either way, but if I had to choose, I preferred not seeing them.

Still… I was curious.

Had they finally given up on stalking me because they no longer saw a reason to?

Or were they just busy with something else?

I'd like to think it was the former, but somehow, that didn't seem likely.

"…Here, eat this too. I read in a book that it's good for you. Don't ask me how it's good for you."

By now, Dogeon seemed to have accepted that I genuinely cared about him.

He no longer nitpicked over my meal selections as much.

He did pick out a few things he wanted, but at least he didn't remove anything I had chosen for him.

That was good enough.

People should eat what they want too, after all.

…Even if the things he wanted were weird vegetables I didn't understand.

"Oh, salmon today? Well, at least it's better than tomatoes."

I wanted to give him a very enthusiastic nod in agreement.

No matter how much you disliked it, salmon was still meat.

How could you possibly compare it to a pile of greens?

Seeing Dogeon devour everything on his plate without hesitation only confirmed that I was making the right choices for him.

Maybe I should cook for him sometime.

…Not that I knew how to cook anything besides instant ramen.

And this world didn't even have ramen.

So, yeah. That was out.

"…Uh, just enjoy your meal."

I tried to think of something else I could do for him, but nothing came to mind.

The only thing I had any real knowledge of was books.

But I couldn’t exactly take him to the library and suggest we read a novel together.

Even as an introvert, I knew that was pushing it.

Talking in a library would just annoy other people, and besides, there was no guarantee he’d even enjoy it.

Hmm. I wanted to do something for him.

There had to be something…

While I absentmindedly ate, lost in thought, Dogeon must have noticed the troubled look on my face because he suddenly asked,

“Is something bothering you?”

“…Ah, it’s nothing major. It’s just… You do so much for me, but I don’t feel like I do anything for you in return. That thought made me a little gloomy.”

Thinking about it now, the only things I had ever done for him were paying for dessert, tutoring him, and talking with him.

That wasn’t nothing, but it didn’t feel like enough.

“Ah, if that’s what’s on your mind, you don’t have to be so disheartened. There are people in this world who, just by being there, bring great comfort to others.”

“…Really? That sounds… enviable. To be able to help others just by existing.”

I wasn’t being sarcastic. I meant it.

If you could earn goodwill without doing anything, that was an amazing thing.

But even then, wouldn't receiving goodwill without giving anything back feel like a burden?

"…I'm not talking about 'other people.' I'm talking about you, Lady Hoyeon.

You've already done so much for me. Even if you don't realize it."

…Me?

Wait.

What exactly had I done?

Aside from sticking by his side—and even then, I'd been a nuisance to him before, hadn't I?

"…Really? Just by being here, I help you?"

"Yes. Every time I see you, I feel energized."

W-What kind of person says something like that to someone they've forced to eat things and actively hindered at times?!

"…Just eat your food! What nonsense—"

"No, really. How could I not feel strengthened when I see the person I love?"

Wh—?!

Why the hell was he saying this in public?!

I often wondered if Dogeon had any sense of shame.

From the way he spouted these ridiculous, embarrassing things without a second thought, I was starting to think he didn't.

And the worst part was, he was completely sincere.

That just made it harder to handle.

I wanted to run, but his plate was still half full, so I couldn't just leave him here.

Fine, then. You leave me no choice.

"Hoyeon, I—Mmph?!"

While he was distracted talking, I shoved a spoonful of food into his mouth.

(Obviously not my spoon.)

"…Stop talking and just eat!"

He clearly hadn't expected this, fumbling for a moment before finally swallowing.

And the moment he did, I shoved in another spoonful.

I might have thought something about this was wrong, but I didn't feel guilty.

Not even a little.

This was entirely his fault.

Who says things like that in public?!

Completely unaware that my actions were drawing even more attention, I quickly dragged him out of the cafeteria.

"…From now on, don't say things like that in crowded places…!"

I was weak to kindness, okay?

He had no idea how lucky he was that I only reacted this much.

"What? But I was just complimenting you…"

If I had to guess, he was probably feeling unfairly wronged.

Like, Why am I being scolded for saying something nice?

But it was embarrassing!

“Getting compliments in front of people is embarrassing.”

That was all it took for Dogeon to finally understand.

Well, I supposed extroverts wouldn’t get it.

They wouldn’t know how embarrassing it was for someone to get flustered over a single compliment.

“…Ah, I see. I’ll be more careful from now on.

So, that means as long as we’re alone, I can compliment you all I want, right?”

…Wait.

Was that how this worked?

I guess so.

When it was just the two of us, I had no problem saying things I’d never say in public.

When we were alone, I didn’t feel as embarrassed.

“…Yeah. If it’s just us… it’s fine.”

…Then why did I feel so uneasy?

Something about the way he said it felt off.

“Hmm… Then, Hoyeon. You know we’re going to the Great Forest in about a week, right?”

I did.

It had been decided by just a few votes.

I hadn't really cared where we went, but I supposed the forest was more calming than the ocean.

"Yeah. I know. Why?"

"Then, could you bring that medicine you took that night?"

…

That night.

The night we…

That same night, he had panicked, demanding what we would do if something happened.

So I had reassured him—I had taken the medicine.

Of course, to be completely certain, I'd have to get checked in a few days.

But I had taken it that night, so the chances were less than 1%.

It wasn't impossible, but the odds were incredibly low.

My mother always said, If it's not zero, it can happen.

But that was her.

For ordinary people like me, numbers like that didn't feel real.

…That wasn't the issue right now.

My heart was pounding too hard to ignore.

And for some reason, I felt feverish.

Because what he really meant by that was—

He wanted to do it again.

“Th-Th-That—uhh… Uhhh…”

No, see, that time, I had been in heat!

My brain had basically short-circuited!

I wasn’t against it, but this was too sudden—!

Was this normal among extroverts?!

“See? Even when we’re alone, it’s not that different.”

I had been spiraling when Dogeon’s words snapped me back to reality.

Wait.

So he wasn’t serious?

“…Were you testing me?”

“You said it was fine when we were alone, so I wanted to see for myself.

Oh, but I do want you to bring that medicine. What do you think?”

“……Fineee…”

I’d never heard my own voice sound so small before.

Even an ant crawling would’ve made more noise.

***

In just a few days, Gloria had recovered enough to walk again.

Though wielding her favored weapon or leaping between walls like she used to was still beyond her.

“…I see. So, all of that happened while I was bedridden…”

The Elf Who Lost Their Spirit, Hoyeon’s Mysterious Actions, and the Unknown World Tree

None of these matters were particularly significant when compared to Stefania.

However, that didn’t mean they could be ignored entirely.

Now that Stefania had disappeared, the greatest source of instability on this continent was Hoyeon.

The scriptures had warned: Fear that which comes from the East.

It was only natural.

In reality, trade wasn’t completely cut off—there was some intermediary trade through an island nation—but to the people of this continent, the East remained a place of fear.

After all, five hundred years ago, demons had crossed over from the East.

And with Georg, a living witness to those times, still around, their fear was justified.

“Still, thanks to Ethan and me running around everywhere, we’ve uncovered quite a bit!”

Cecilia declared proudly, though most of what she had learned wasn’t particularly important.

For example—

Dogeon ate more vegetables than meat.

Hoyeon liked Dogeon.

Camilla took Exipri to her room every night.

Some of it was even inaccurate.

But Gloria found Cecilia's enthusiasm endearing nonetheless.

"Yes, you've worked very hard. Come here, I'll reward you with a hug."

Cecilia, who had not been expecting a reward, tried to flee.

However, escaping from someone blessed by the gods was impossible.

"Aaaah… Are you really someone who was bedridden just days ago?"

"Not all humans are weak, as the elves believe."

"Impossible…!"

As Cecilia despaired over her crumbling worldview, Ena turned her gaze to Decatria.

She had seen him just before the decisive battle, and back then, she had been sure he wouldn't last a month before something happened to him.

Yet, he had managed to avoid causing any major incidents so far.

Clearly, something had changed.

Was it because of this elf?

Gloria released Cecilia from her embrace and shifted her focus to Decatria.

The way he looked at the elf instead of her—it wasn't hard to guess what emotions were stirring inside him.

If it were Decatria, he would likely dismiss such feelings as mere distractions from serving his god.

But Gloria loved meddling in other people's romances.

So she made up her mind.

She would personally bring them together.

"Decatria, let's have a little chat. Just the two of us."

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 105

Chapter 105: Like Grass—Naturally, As If It Were Obvious

So… is this how I was supposed to do it?

I wondered if I had soaked it too much, but there was no undoing it now.

I was told I just had to wet it, but since nothing was happening, I started doubting if I had done it correctly.

Still, when something didn't work, 90% of the time, it was user error rather than a defect.

Since I had brought it directly from my homeland, the chances of it being faulty were close to none.

I stared at the urine-soaked paper absentmindedly, completely unaware of how much time had passed.

Then, at last, a red line began to appear.

It was on the 'No' side.

Just in case the results took longer to show, I waited a little longer—but nothing changed.

…Yep, it was working just fine.

I had been worried that even a 1% chance might slip through, but thankfully, it hadn't.

Mother wouldn't be becoming a grandmother.

More than that—

If anyone's heart would've been shattered, it would be my father's…

That was another problem.

Even if I could somehow persuade Mother, my father's reaction to Dogeon was easy to predict.

He'd probably draw his sword first and ask questions later, demanding, "How dare some mutt that rolled in from who-knows-where lay a hand on my daughter?!"

…Honestly, I had no idea what it was like to have a child, so I couldn't even begin to understand his feelings.

The closest thing I had ever raised was a dog, and I hadn't even been that attached to it.

Maybe… it would be like thinking of Dogeon falling for another woman.

That was a thought I never wanted to entertain.

If that ever happened, I would rip them apart and reclaim what was mine—

…No, that would be dangerous.

Still, I could understand my father to some extent.

It wasn't that he saw me as his possession.

He simply didn't want to lose someone precious to him.

The feeling of something being taken away—this burning sensation in my chest—was only natural.

Tired of just staring at a piece of paper in the bathroom, I flushed it and threw myself onto the bed, feeling lighter.

I had been spending so much time with Dogeon lately that I hadn't had a moment to myself.

My body wasn't tired, but mentally, I felt drained.

Even if it was time spent with someone I loved, socializing still drained an introvert's energy.

So today, I planned to just laze around or hang out in the library.

It was common sense that Friday afternoons were for spending time alone.

"…Hnnnngh."

Being alone was peaceful—but at the same time, oddly lonely.

I hadn't felt this way before.

People really did change quickly.

Though, considering how comfortable I still felt, I supposed my core remained the same.

"…Ugh… Ngh… My bed smells like Dogeon…"

It was probably about time to wash the sheets.

But there was no need to do it today.

I wasn't going to see him, so I needed a substitute.

Sniiiiiff… Haaa…

The faint scent of blood mixed in, which was enough to bring back memories of that night.

Not that I needed any reminders—I remembered it all perfectly.

But sensory triggers made memories even sharper.

No. No.

Today was supposed to be my time.

Thinking about memories with someone else would only make me lonelier.

So I forcefully cut off my train of thought.

***

Trips and breaks were separate things, which meant I had about three and a half months to be completely free.

Whether in this world or on Earth, it seemed like first years were always given time to slack off.

…So why didn't I have someone I loved back in my first year?

Thinking about it, it wouldn't have been strange if I had developed feelings for someone.

But when I tried to recall, I couldn't think of a single person.

Depressing.

Before my thoughts could spiral further into despair, I shot up from the bed.

If I stayed there any longer, I'd probably lose all will to move and waste away.

Time for the library.

The best way to push out sad thoughts was to fill my mind with other things.

I reached for whatever clothes were closest, but then my gaze landed on my casual outfits.

…No, there was no point in dressing up today.

I wasn't planning to see anyone.

Shaking off the thought, I headed out.

I stopped by a shop on the way and bought a cream bun to nibble on as I walked into the library.

Surprisingly, it was nearly empty.

Well, exams were over, so no one really needed to be here.

Even those who loved reading wouldn't be so passionate as to head straight to the library after class.

The librarians spotted me bringing in food and looked like they wanted to scold me—

But the moment they saw who I was, they shut their mouths as if nothing had happened.

Lately, it felt like I could get away with anything.

It was starting to feel like the academy treated me differently from everyone else.

Wasn't this place supposed to emphasize equality and all that?

Or was it secretly providing special services to people of high status?

Though, considering how they treated Anya, that didn't seem to be the case.

Well, I wasn’t complaining.

It made things easier.

I had already read most of the novels here, so I started browsing the science section instead.

It wasn’t as advanced as my homeland, but they had come pretty far.

The fact that they had managed this much without a god’s guidance was impressive.

Considering they had no modern research facilities or ways to test theories, I wondered if—given enough time—they could catch up.

But those thoughts quickly became irrelevant the moment I glanced outside.

Dogeon was walking with Iris.

***

I had been thinking about where to take Hoyeon today—

Only for her to suddenly say she was tired and heading back early.

Since we had been practically glued together lately, I had assumed we would spend today together too.

But for some reason, she had distanced herself first.

Not that I minded.

There were a few things I needed to take care of while she wasn’t around.

It sounded like a big deal, but really—

All I had to do was sort out my relationships with the other heroines.

Is It a Big Deal? Probably Not, but I Can't Do It with Hoyeon Around.

Since I couldn’t possibly handle this with Hoyeon by my side, today was the day to settle everything.

I didn’t need to seek out Camilla or Iris.

With them, I had already crossed an irreversible bridge.

It wasn’t exactly fair that simply keeping Hoyeon by my side had cemented that fate, but such was life.

That left Anya as my first priority.

Though, I hesitated.

Would I be interrupting her when she was having fun with Eric?

As for Cecilia, I had no idea where she was.

That naturally left me with Iris.

She was always alone, sipping on a drink at a café.

It wouldn’t be too difficult to approach her.

There wasn’t much of a relationship to begin with, but even so, this was something that needed to be properly settled.

When I arrived at the café, sure enough, Iris was sitting in her usual spot, drinking something.

“It’s good to see you, Lady Iris.”

“Oh, you’re… Dogeon, right? It feels like it’s been a while. So, um… How is Lady Hoyeon doing?”

We had interacted a few times in private, but nothing had ever progressed between us.

We were just… acquaintances.

That was all.

“She’s doing well. And you, Lady Iris?”

“Fortunately, a certain rude individual has disappeared, so I’m quite comfortable. So, what brings you to me today?”

“Well, I…”

I would like for us to remain good friends.

That was the gist of what I wanted to say.

Connections were valuable resources.

Rather than cutting ties completely, it was better to leave room for potential cooperation.

“Friends…? Well, that’s fine. But weren’t we already friends?”

“…Oh. Were we?”

Even though this version of Iris was much more relaxed than in the original story, at her core, she was still an outsider—just like Hoyeon.

Her definition of "friendship" had a very low threshold.

“Yes. Hmm… I’m a little bored. Want to take a walk? I’ve always wanted to make that kind of request now that I have a friend.”

It felt a bit like I was cheating on Hoyeon while she was napping, which made me hesitate.

But it should be fine.

She would understand if I explained it properly.

After all, this was about settling relationships, not starting new ones.

She'd probably even appreciate it.

"Sure."

To be honest, I was mostly curious.

In the original story, Iris had always been passive—someone who got swept up in things.

I had never seen her take initiative.

What did she like?

What did she dislike?

It wasn't particularly important.

But humans were naturally curious creatures.

"So, Lady Iris, do you have anything you particularly like or dislike?"

I figured I'd cut off her endless praise for caffeine by asking.

"Of course! Let's see… Coffee with exactly one spoon of sugar, mixing coffee concentrate with milk for a smoother taste, and… oh, sorry, I'm just talking about coffee again, aren't I? Umm… aside from coffee, I suppose I enjoy stargazing."

Stargazing.

It suited her surname, Stargazer.

"When I look at the night sky, there's always one star that feels like it's watching over us. Persistently, but without meaning. It's hard to explain… but that feeling is so fascinating that I can't stop looking at the sky."

I had never actually gazed at the night sky, so I couldn't relate.

But learning something new about her was interesting.

When I asked what she disliked, her answers were exactly what I expected:

Watery coffee, iced coffee, and Stefania.

I figured as much.

I found it refreshing how different conversations with her felt compared to talking with Hoyeon.

But just as I was enjoying our walk, I suddenly felt a chill run down my spine.

I turned to check my surroundings—

And met a pair of burning golden eyes and twitching fox ears aimed straight at me.

Her tail fur was puffed up.

She was not going to take this lightly.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 106

Chapter 106: How to Handle a Predator

"What are you two doing?"

Her voice didn’t carry anger or betrayal.

But honestly, that didn’t matter.

Because the pressure she was exuding was so overwhelming that it felt like the air around us had dropped to freezing temperatures.

Iris, who had been passionately sharing her thoughts about constellations just moments ago, froze in place—like a frog caught in a snake’s gaze.

"Ah, Hoyeon. I thought you were taking the day off… um, did you suddenly feel like coming outside? Maybe for a cream bun or something—"

"What were you two doing?"

I had tried to talk my way out of it, but Hoyeon wasn’t in a state where words would do anything.

No matter what I thought or said, the only answer she wanted to hear was the one she had in mind.

Otherwise—

Her claws or fangs might turn on me… or on Iris.

And I was certain of it.

If it were just me, that would be fine.

But if she harmed Iris, that would be a problem.

She could get suspended, or worse—expelled.

That wouldn't do either of us any good.

So I had to calm her down.

All hesitation, all courtesy—gone.

Her dominance was so absolute that just standing here made my stomach churn.

"Ah, it was nothing much. We were just having a little chat. Right, Lady Iris?"

"…Ghk—Hrk… Y-Yes… Hiee… Uegh…!"

Crap.

Iris looked like she was about to choke.

Not that I blamed her.

The first time I had faced Hoyeon's wrath, I could barely hold myself together either.

And Iris already feared Hoyeon on a normal day.

Honestly, I should commend her for managing to answer at all.

"What were you talking about?"

Every word she spoke felt like it made the world tremble.

Or maybe it was just me trembling.

Probably both.

But I could worry about that later.

For now, calming her down was priority number one.

"We were talking about our… future relationships. You know. How I used to, um… move around a lot before. I was just sorting things out."

"Speak in a way I can understand."

It wasn't that complicated.

Then again, maybe it was to her.

She had never really had "friends," so the concept of sorting out relationships might be foreign to her.

If you've never had connections before, there'd be nothing to sort out.

But saying that in front of Iris, who was part of that "sorting," seemed like a bad idea.

She might be barely breathing now, but she was still listening.

"Basically… You and I have a unique relationship, right?"

"Mhm. Dogeon is mine. I won't give you to anyone. No one."

Was she serious?

Was this her real opinion?

Possession, huh…

I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

I had thought we were equals, but the way she phrased it…

It was a word choice that made me feel oddly unsettled.

"R-Right. So, if you’re the most important person to me, then I should treat you the best, right? That’s why I’m putting some distance between myself and others. So I can focus all my attention on the most important person."

Hoyeon stared at me, then at Iris.

When she looked at me, there was no hostility.

But when her gaze landed on Iris…

It was filled with nothing but hostility.

Poor Iris flinched and swallowed hard every time their eyes met.

If it were Anya, she would have at least been able to hold her ground.

"Most… important… person. Most important… person. So you weren’t abandoning me to go play with someone else…? Oh, thank gods…!"

After repeating my words to herself, the sharp glint in Hoyeon’s eyes finally faded.

They were still a bit piercing, but at least they were back to her usual intensity.

That meant the worst of it had passed.

The suffocating pressure had disappeared as well, allowing Iris to finally cough and take in deep, gasping breaths.

"I really thought… you had gotten distracted by someone else again…"

Hoyeon let out a huge sigh, looking visibly relieved.

Like she had come here fully expecting a battle, only for it to be a false alarm.

So that’s what this was about.

Was she angry?

I wasn’t sure.

If she was, I would have already been slapped across the face.

It wasn’t anger.

But I wasn’t going to press her about it.

After all, I was the one who had left room for misunderstanding.

Keeping my mouth shut was the best course of action.

"…Hnn. I’m so… so relieved. Really. But still… you shouldn’t be doing things that can be misunderstood in the first place!"

Now she was mad.

At least enough to scold me.

And apparently, she was aware of how her speech sounded, because she was trying to adjust it.

Not that it mattered.

The only people here were the three of us, and one of those three was still half-dead.

"Haha… Yes. You said you were resting today, so I figured I’d use the time to sort things out. I didn’t expect you to show up."

Looks like I’d have to postpone dealing with the rest of this.

But judging by her reaction, she wasn’t against the idea.

So she’d probably let me handle it later.

"Ah… I see. So I messed things up by coming out here… Then why don’t we just finish it all today? I’ll allow it. And since I’m free, I’ll come with you!"

Wait.

I knew she wasn’t opposed to this, but wasn’t she a little too excited?

…No.

I could see it.

The look in her eyes.

She wanted me to cut ties with everyone and focus solely on her.

It made me chuckle wryly.

"Alright, alright. Sure. But first, I’d like to move Lady Iris somewhere more comfortable…"

"She’s not a child. She’ll manage on her own. Don’t fuss over it. Now, come on! Let’s go!"

With that, Hoyeon pushed me forward.

I felt bad about leaving Iris behind like this.

But if I did try to help her, Hoyeon would definitely get mad.

So, mentally apologizing, I let myself be dragged away.

Sorry, Iris. I’ll buy you a coffee later.

***

"Hnn. Goodbye, Eric."

"Take care, Anya."

Anastasia, her steps still unsteady, watched her lover disappear from sight before immediately heading for the shower.

Her body ached—especially her lower abdomen and thighs—so all she wanted to do was collapse into bed.

But she was way too sticky to sleep comfortably.

And Eric had insisted she wash up.

So she had no reason not to.

How Desperate Must He Have Been?

Hoyeon had begged so insistently that Anastasia had briefly wondered if it was truly necessary.

But no brilliant answers came to mind.

She tried to shake off the lingering sensations, pulling herself from her daze and stepping out of the bathroom without getting sidetracked.

As she slowly drifted into slumber, her mind painted images of a warm, harmonious home.

Lost in the comfort of that dream, she didn’t notice the commotion outside her door.

"Is she asleep? Or maybe she’s out. Lady Anastasia, are you in there?"

"Hmm… Step aside. I want to try something. This time… I think it’ll work!"

"…You’re not seriously going to pick the lock, are you? Hoyeon, I don’t think that’s a good ide—"

Click.

The doorknob turned.

Hoyeon, unbothered, muttered, "Oh, it worked," and stepped inside Anastasia’s room without hesitation.

"Don’t look! No, don’t look, and don’t come in!"

The door slammed shut almost immediately.

Dogeon, who had been debating whether to follow, was left standing alone in the hallway.

He considered opening the door and asking why, but knowing the security enchantments, it would likely blast his ears off if he tried.

So, abandoned like a stray dog, he could only wait outside.

"She’ll come out soon… right?"

She had told him not to enter.

So all he could do was wait.

He thought he had caught a glimpse of bare skin, but he chalked it up to his imagination.

And so, he patiently stood outside.

***

Hoyeon was busy.

She shook the barely-dressed Anastasia awake, handing her a set of clothes.

Anastasia, still clinging to a pleasant dream, groggily frowned.

But as her mind caught up with reality, she realized someone who shouldn't be here was here—

And she bolted upright.

"L-Lady Hoyeon?! How did you get in here? I never let you in or gave you the password—"

"I know. I'll explain later. First, put on some clothes. Dogeon wants to talk to you."

"…Dogeon? To me?"

Her attempt to make sense of the situation was swiftly crushed by Hoyeon's completely unhelpful explanation.

They had grown distant lately, but she hadn't done anything that warranted a private discussion with Dogeon.

Or had she?

Was he about to say, "I know you have someone, but I don't mind. Please accept me too—"?

She quickly dismissed the ridiculous thought.

If Dogeon were here to say something like that, Hoyeon wouldn't have just stood there.

No—she would've torn him apart before he even got the words out.

Their relationship was at least as deep as hers and Eric's.

Maybe even deeper.

"Alright… I'll go. But you will explain this properly later."

Muttering to herself, she slipped into the clothes Hoyeon had handed her and hesitantly followed her out.

Dogeon was still waiting in the hallway.

As Anastasia stepped out, she exchanged glances with Hoyeon standing behind her.

Something about their silent exchange sent a shiver down her spine.

Just what was he about to say?

Her curiosity was piqued.

And then—

"Lady Anastasia. Just as we have so far, I would like us to remain good friends."

—It was exactly what she had wanted to say.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 107

Chapter 107: To the Great Forest

"Y-Yes? Friends…? Ah, yes! That sounds great! I was actually waiting for the right moment to bring it up with you, Dogeon, but I never expected you'd be the one to approach me first…"

"No, I understand. We've both been… quite busy in our own ways. Both myself and you, Lady Anastasia."

"Th-That's… true?"

He conveniently left out what exactly had kept them so busy, but since they both already understood it implicitly, there was no need to bring it up.

"Yes. That's all I had to say. Hmm… How are things going with Eric?"

Dogeon could have left right then and there, but curiosity got the better of him. He casually inquired about how far things had progressed.

"H-How do you know about that?!"

"You make it so obvious. It's harder not to know. The rumors have already reached my ears, you know. Even the frozen North is said to be blooming with love."

"…Huaaa… Impossible… I was sure I had been flawless…"

Watching her flustered reaction, Dogeon thought to himself that, unless a war broke out, Eric was in for a tough time. That is, assuming war doesn't happen.

From the moment he had arrived in this world, Dogeon had convinced himself that there was no way to undo things, so he pushed aside any lingering guilt. When Anastasia caught sight of his bitter smile, she got mildly irritated, thinking he was laughing at her. But Dogeon easily brushed it off.

"No, I was just thinking that Sir Eric will have a lot of trouble in the future."

"What is that supposed to mean…? Why would Eric have trouble? If anyone is struggling right now, it's me…! Ah. I wasn't supposed to say that…!"

"Are you finished talking, Dogeon?"

Hoyeon had been silently allowing their conversation to continue, but as the topic became more frivolous, her patience was wearing thin.

She knew that friends could chat and joke around like this, but still, she grabbed Dogeon's wrist with just enough force to make her point. That's enough. Follow me.

"…Oh dear, looks like it's time to go. Will you be alright?"

Seeing Hoyeon suddenly gripping Dogeon's wrist tightly, Anastasia realized that Hoyeon was also signaling her.

"Ah… Yes. Um, Lady Hoyeon? You must tell me how you got inside the Elves Forest on the way there, alright? You promised!"

As soon as Anastasia got her answer, Hoyeon was already pulling Dogeon away. Desperately, Anastasia called after her, demanding an explanation.

Hoyeon simply responded with a nod.

"Alright, who's next?"

Hoyeon was fired up, ready to quickly sort out all of Dogeon's relationships, but Dogeon scratched the back of his head awkwardly and replied,

"That's it. We're done."

Hoyeon had expected to deal with dozens of girls and was confused to hear him say they were finished after meeting only two.

"…You didn't meet anyone beforehand or anything?"

There's no way someone as sociable as him would have this few connections… Hoyeon thought. Unaware of the reason why Dogeon had so few friends, she pressed him for answers.

"No. Well, there is someone I should meet, but… they haven't shown up recently."

"I see… That's fewer than I expected… Hm. Then, do you want to go somewhere? Maybe the zoo, or just for a walk…? Let's go somewhere."

Since the topic could be a sensitive one, Hoyeon did her best to change the subject despite her lack of conversational skills. Dogeon had already heard her muttering under her breath, but he found her efforts endearing and decided to go along with it.

"Sure. Then let's go to the zoo. Last time, we went to the botanical garden."

The memory of their last zoo visit flashed through Hoyeon's mind—where the divine beasts had quietly slinked away from them. She wasn't particularly eager to go again, but since it was with Dogeon, she figured it didn't really matter.

"This time, how about we check out the magical beasts instead…? But if you don't want to, we don't have to."

Though they had bizarre appearances and tended to view her companion as a potential meal, Hoyeon was more interested in magical beasts than divine ones this time.

"I don’t see why not. But answer me one thing first. What did your mother ask you?"

"…Huh?"

How do you know about that? That should have been my first question, but I was so shocked that I couldn't form a proper response. That was something my mother told only me.

"Y-You… how do you…?"

It wasn’t something I couldn’t say, nor was it a question that had to be kept secret. But I was too stunned not to ask how he knew.

"Ahaha… A while back, I had a little chat with your mother. Without you knowing."

Through her journal.

The moment I heard that, my mind went blank.

More than anything, there was something I needed to confirm immediately.

"Did… did you read it…?"

"I did, but… I didn’t understand what it meant. Ah, and I’m really sorry for snooping in your journal."

Phew… Thank goodness…

There were so many embarrassing things in there—like wetting the bed as a kid and blaming it on the world map, catching and eating frogs because I was starving after running around in the mountains, throwing a tantrum at my dad during puberty and crying under my blanket, or getting caught sneaking food from the kitchen behind my mom's back…

He didn’t understand it. Thank goodness…

"…It's fine. I mean, I get that you'd be curious… Haa… As long as you didn't understand it… B-But next time, if you want to know something, just ask me!"

I could just tell him normally. I didn't want to create unnecessary tension between us.

Reading my journal out loud would be way too much, but… Dogeon is a good guy, so he wouldn't ask me to do something like that.

As for the conversation he had with my mother… it must have been through my journal. And the question—did my mother tell him herself?

That would be the only way he could know. I never mentioned it to anyone.

"Hmm. So, what was the question again? 'Can humans live without gods?' …That's what she asked. I don't know what my mother meant by it, but it seems like it has some deep meaning… probably."

Or maybe not. My mother sometimes asked philosophical-sounding questions just to mess with me.

The truth was, I had no idea.

If she meant survive, then sure, we could. But thrive? That was another story.

If she meant advance, I'd probably answer… "It would take too long."

Especially since this continent wasn't even unified, and the so-called greatest academy mostly focused on training students to overpower others.

Pure sciences and magical studies were practically nonexistent.

"I see… 'Can humans live without gods?' …I see. So that's why…"

What is he so convinced about? Is it because he's the protagonist? Come to think of it, maybe my mother approached Dogeon because he is the protagonist.

She might not know this world is a novel… but she must recognize that he's special.

If that’s the case, everything makes sense.

"…What? Did you figure something out?"

Tell me, too. I wanted to understand my mother’s intentions, even a little.

"Nah. It’s barely worth calling a discovery. Alright, let’s go. The magical beasts can be dangerous, so I’ll stick close to you."

But before I could question him further, Dogeon casually linked his arm with mine and headed toward the zoo.

Shouldn’t the guy be the one protecting the girl in dangerous situations?

…Wait. Since being near me is the safest place, I guess this makes sense.

Sometimes, this guy is too rational.

"…Uh. Yeah, let’s go."

But that was something I liked about him.

Because it meant he pointed out things I overlooked.

While watching the magical beasts, I let out a startled shriek at one point… but well, I’ll just brush that off as part of the experience.

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I was secretly curious about what kind of transportation we’d be using. Would it be the same carriage we took to the academy, or something I hadn't even considered?

Judging by the level of technology and environmental conditions, teleportation via ley lines—like in my homeland—was probably out of the

question. Still, I wanted to see just how advanced this continent was, despite its people calling gods "demons."

"…An airship…? I never expected to see one of these."

Honestly, I had only anticipated something like a train at best. This was unexpected. Plus, the way mana swirled around certain areas suggested that it wasn't just floating aimlessly in the sky.

The interior was spacious—compared to similar technology from my original world, this one seemed far superior.

Even so, it didn't seem large enough to accommodate the entire first-year class. Then again, how many vehicles could transport hundreds of students at once?

Of course, within a few dozen paces of me, there was no one besides Dogeon, as if some invisible barrier had been erected around us.

I'd thought this was the kind of place where everyone just rode around in carriages, but they actually had something impressive like this.

"Yes… I had only heard of these before, but this is my first time seeing one with my own eyes. I heard the empire uses them for military purposes… I never thought I'd actually ride one."

Dogeon didn't seem completely clueless about it, but it looked like he hadn't expected to board one either. Well, I hadn't, either.

"Where are you, Lady Hoyeon? Sir Dogeon? Ah, you there! Have you seen Lady Hoyeon?"

"Ah… um… I-I'm sorry, Lady Anastasia, but I don't know. M-my group is waiting, so I'll be going now…"

"Ah, wait a moment! Haa… Where could they be…?"

From a short distance away, I could hear Anya's voice, anxiously searching for us.

Oh, right. I promised to tell her how I got inside.

"We're here."

"Ah! Lady Hoyeon? Where—ah, there you are!"

Anya and Eric appeared, weaving their way through the crowd. Since this was a trip, they had dressed up more than usual, which was noticeable at a glance.

"…Anya, I just want to check—are airships like this common on this continent?"

That was the first thing I needed to know. If these were standard here, I might have to reevaluate my assumptions.

"No. Airships of this size? There are barely more than ten in existence. However, smaller and mid-sized ones aren't particularly rare. Anyway, you remember what we talked about last time, right?"

"Of course. I just opened it, and it opened."

"…What?"

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Chapter 108: Preview

“…You just did it and it worked…? Do you even realize how absurd that sounds?”

If Hoyeon explained something, Anya would immediately ask how it was possible. Then, when she explained that, Anya would demand to know how that worked.

Unlike last time, their conversation kept spiraling into an endless chain of questions.

Honestly, this was probably the normal reaction. Maybe I was the odd one for setting aside understanding and focusing on how to make use of it instead.

If I had to summarize Hoyeon’s explanation in a single sentence, it would be: ‘I don’t know why, but when I do it, it works.’ Anya, on the other hand, was still stuck on figuring out why.

Thinking about it, it really was bizarre. There was a time when I seriously considered the possibility that Hoyeon unconsciously disrupted magic formulas around her. In fact, even now, she still did.

There were a few exceptions—things that functioned properly—but I had no way of knowing what would be nullified and what would remain intact.

“Ugh…! I’m telling you, I don’t know! How am I supposed to explain something that just works when I do it?!”

“…Sir Dogeon, not that I doubt Lady Hoyeon, but… is there really nothing she’s keeping from us? This is just too unbelievable.”

“There isn’t. Which makes it even more confusing. If she doesn’t know, how could we?”

“…That’s true.”

Eric, perhaps weary of his lover’s unproductive back-and-forth, turned to me to see if I had any insights into Hoyeon’s secret. But even if he asked… I couldn’t answer what I didn’t know.

I asked her questions every day, slowly piecing together information, but there was still so much I didn’t understand about her—especially from an objective standpoint.

Her words often sounded convincing, but considering what I knew from the original story, it was clear that the East wasn’t some flawless utopia.

An entire nation moving toward a singular goal, as if brainwashed. People willingly offering themselves as sacrifices…

“…Sigh, fine. I’ll believe you. So you’re saying, ‘It just works when you do it.’ Right?”

“Wait, what’s with that tone…? You sound like you’re only reluctantly believing me.”

“Well, because it still doesn’t make sense! ‘It just works’—do you even realize how ridiculous that sounds to someone hearing it?”

“Argh, fine! I’ll explain from the beginning again!”

Their seemingly endless debate only came to an end when the in-flight announcement signaled it was time for lunch. Though neither of them

seemed upset, they looked utterly drained, as if they had finally given up on convincing each other.

“…Let’s just agree to disagree. Lady Hoyeon, you say it worked because you did it, and I’ll accept it based on my own reasoning… If we keep this up, we’ll never reach a conclusion.”

“…For everyone’s sake, let’s do that.”

Hoyeon, evidently exhausted from Anya’s relentless questioning, flopped against me, lightly tapping the back of my hand with her tail.

It wasn’t hard to figure out what she was asking for. As I gently stroked her head, she twitched her ears in satisfaction, as if regaining some energy.

“…Ugh, how am I supposed to explain something that just works when I do it…”

She muttered in frustration, but even I had to admit that she lacked an understanding of others’ perspectives. Still, I was sure she had at least tried to explain.

"You worked hard explaining. But Lady Hoyeon, sometimes, making up a convincing lie is better. Even when you tell the truth, there are people who just won’t accept it."

“…You say some really creepy things so casually.”

Was that creepy? I didn’t think so.

In human relationships, well-placed lies were an essential tool. Hoyeon would understand that eventually.

“Creepy? No, that’s just how people are.”

I’ll save the deeper conversation for later. First, we should eat.

I naturally led Hoyeon toward the dining area. The crowd was bustling, but as soon as they noticed Hoyeon, they parted like the Red Sea, making it

easy for us to find a seat.

“Eating a meal while looking down from the sky… This is quite a rare experience.”

Hoyeon, clearly unfamiliar with this, gazed out the window in awe. Since she seemed so impressed, I decided to tease her a bit—partly out of curiosity.

“With all your advanced technology, do you not have airships in your homeland?”

“There’s nothing this slow.”

Ah, so they do have them. And fast ones, too.

I couldn’t help but wonder just what kind of place the East really was.

In the original story, the only things I remembered about it were related to medicine, so I had no way of knowing how advanced their technology actually was.

Then again, since the quality of the novel had gone downhill in later parts, I might have skimmed over or forgotten important details.

Still, I didn’t recall any mention of airships or teleportation devices.

And from what she had described, it didn’t sound like the perfectly controlled utopia she had made it out to be, either.

I wanted to dismiss her words as nonsense, but she had personally traveled outside and seen things for herself. So I couldn’t completely ignore her claims.

…Well, I’d find out soon enough. Eventually, I would follow Hoyeon to the East and uncover the truth for myself.

Whether I’d be able to stop the war… that, I didn’t know. But if I could, I hoped I would.

“Is that so? Then take this opportunity to enjoy the pleasure that comes with taking things slow. Didn’t you say your homeland lacked entertainment?”

Technically, she had said they had entertainment, but it wasn’t widely available. Instead, it was stored away in something called the Philosophy Vault…

When I asked what that was, she explained it was a storage for ideas too valuable to discard, yet too impractical to put to use.

Most of the space, apparently, was filled with entertainment-related content.

“I suppose that sounds nice. Speaking of which… what do you plan to do once we reach the forest?”

“What else? We made a promise, remember?”

I wonder if she brought it.

In the original story, the destination of this trip wasn’t the Elves Forest, so I had no idea what we would actually find there.

Would we just wander through the forest and admire the scenery…?

“…R-Right…?”

Hoyeon, still fully conscious, seemed a bit embarrassed.

Come to think of it, there was something else I was curious about.

“Ah, Lady Hoyeon. By the way, what did you tell your guards?”

Their job was to protect her, so they would surely try to follow somehow. But considering the distance… how exactly would they keep up?

“Hmm… Oh, them? I told them to run.”

“…Excuse me?”

“With their abilities… Ah, right. It should take them about two or three days. There won’t be any obstacles to slow their march, so it shouldn’t take too long. But what about you? What did you do about Yeonho?”

…They’re just running the whole way?

The shock barely had time to settle before I realized something—if Hoyeon’s ridiculous stamina wasn’t just her personal quirk but a trait of her entire race, then… maybe this wasn’t so strange.

Still, they’re seriously just running that whole distance?

“…I packed him in my luggage. I made sure to bring plenty of feed and water, so he should be fine…”

If my assumption was correct, then this continent’s chances of winning a war without divine intervention were looking increasingly slim.

How the hell were they supposed to win?

“Well then… I’ll be looking forward to it.”

The way Hoyeon smiled at me, full of hidden meaning, sent a small chill down my spine.

What exactly was she planning this time?

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“…Lady Gloria. Are you sure it’s alright to leave your jurisdiction?”

Ethan asked in a concerned tone, looking at the blonde woman.

“Yes. I came to the academy because of Stefania. And… Ethan. Do you believe in intuition?”

“Intuition…?”

“Yes. That tingling feeling. My instincts are telling me… something is going to happen in the Great Forest.”

Ethan was the type to act based on solid evidence rather than intuition, so he found it difficult to relate to her words. With a hint of dissatisfaction, he asked again.

“What if nothing happens?”

“What do you mean? Then none of the academy students will get hurt, and I’ll have a lovely time resting in the fresh air of the Great Forest. There’s nothing bad about that, is there?”

Faced with Gloria’s carefree smile, Ethan gave up on arguing. She was his superior, both in rank and status.

As one of them basked in leisure and the other in discomfort, a bright, cheerful voice rang out.

“Lady Gloria! Ethan! I brought tea! It won’t taste good if it gets cold, so drink up quickly!”

“You seem quite excited, Cecilla. Is it because we’re heading to your homeland?”

Unlike Ethan, who remained grim, Cecilia was practically floating with happiness.

“Yes! I’m thrilled to introduce my friends to the people I miss so much!”

She was so excited that, in her enthusiasm, she nearly spilled the tea. But somehow, she managed to steady herself and awkwardly handed them their cups.

“…Ehehe… Ahem. Um, Lady Gloria? How is your condition?”

It was obvious she was trying to change the subject to cover up her mistake. The other two exchanged amused smiles.

“Well… I’d say I’m doing alright. I haven’t tested it, but I think I can swing a sword again. Though, I’d rather not have to.”

“Please don’t overexert yourself. Your wounds still haven’t fully healed.”

Though Ethan chided her, Gloria only took it in stride, as if she found even that amusing.

“…Hm, this is a bit off-topic, but… how far along are you two?”

“…I must have misheard.”

“…Huh?”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 109

Chapter 109: Threat

"Oh my, Sunhak. So you were here. No, no, there's no need for you to come out to greet me. More importantly, are you even able to move in that condition?"

"You can just send your soul… Well, I suppose you could do that. But wouldn’t it be more appropriate for this junior to come find you instead? Now then, just a moment. It’s a bit noisy around here, so let me make it quieter first…"

"My, my. You take such good care of your own creations, yet you treat your junior so harshly. It pains me to see it, truly."

"Don’t worry. I’ve merely put them to sleep. Besides, I'm only observing what it is that you, Sunhak, have been trying to build. I have no intention of causing trouble."

"More importantly, what species were those creatures originally based on? They’re neither animal nor plant… What? You used plants as a base and added animalistic traits?"

"Wow… As expected of someone once called a Sage. I never imagined you had created a species by gathering only the best traits. But… why do they lack the ability to reproduce? From what I’ve seen, other than a single

individual I encountered before, none of them seem to have the capability to pass on their lineage."

"Ah, so you sacrificed their reproductive ability to enhance their physical functions… Well, I suppose that makes sense. After all, you can always create more from the Tree of Life. How ruthless of you, Sunhak."

"You say you're still better than Byeolbi…?"

"Oh, please. Are you truly one to speak, when you have stripped the unfortunate humans of this continent of even the chance to evolve? Speaking of which, have you found the answer to Byeolbi's question?"

"…No answer, I see. No, no, I would never dare to doubt you, Sunhak. It's just that… Her daughter will be arriving here soon. Wouldn't it be wise to prepare a convincing answer?"

"You already know, don't you? 'That person' is watching over the child. Which means… they could come here at any time."

"A wise Sage like you must understand that. So… have you given up?"

"Ahaha, you're awfully sensitive to a mere jest. But even this foolish, delinquent junior of yours can tell that you haven't reached a proper conclusion."

"You should prepare something, Sunbae. It has been 2,500 years. Byeolbi has been waiting 2,500 years for your answer."

"To 'that person,' such a span of time is but a fleeting moment. But to you, a Sage who still remains human, that is not the case. Surely, after all this time, you must have come up with at least one answer."

"Sunhak. No… Ganian. I, Sikari, await the answer you have found after 2,000 years of inquiry."

—

"Welcome, students of Amaurus Academy. Originally, we had planned a grand welcoming ceremony, but… Hmm. Due to an unforeseen incident,' I must ask for your understanding as we offer you only this humble reception."

"Something feels… off."

Since it was a forest, I hadn't expected anything like a landing pad. I thought we'd have to walk after getting dropped off nearby, but surprisingly, there was one. Even so, just as Dogeon had pointed out, the atmosphere felt chaotic.

Even someone like me, who struggled to read the mood, could tell. Wreaths and decorations were scattered haphazardly on the ground, and in the distance, elves were clutching their heads as if trying to clear their minds, while others were carrying away those who had collapsed.

There was no smell of blood or death, so it didn't seem like anything too severe had happened. But at the very least, it was clear that something significant had occurred.

"Elder, what happened here?"

As if trying to grasp the situation, Georg stepped forward and approached the elder who had come to greet us. However, the elder didn't seem to recognize him at all.

"My apologies for the rudeness, but… who might you be?"

Well, considering that their only similarity was their pointed ears, I suppose it made sense that the elder wouldn't recognize him. Their height and muscle mass were so drastically different.

"Hah. Just because I changed my outer shell a little, you fail to recognize me? How about now?"

Georg scoffed in disbelief before covering himself in mana. Curious about what he was trying to do, I watched blankly as the mana began to swirl

around him.

"W-Wait, could it be… Elliot?! O-Oh! We wondered where you had disappeared without a word…!"

"How long are you going to keep calling me by that old name? I'm Georg, an old man. Save your awe for later—just tell me what happened. If it's something dangerous, things are going to get troublesome."

The tanned, muscular brute had disappeared, and in his place stood a refined, handsome young man.

His fierce, scowling eyes and malicious-looking expression remained unchanged. But at least now, with his pale blue hair resembling both the elder's and Cecilia's, he actually looked like an elf.

Well… almost. His hair was such a washed-out sky blue that it was nearly white, and he lacked the cross-shaped pupils that elves were supposed to have. According to books, every elf had a cross in their eyes, but he didn't. Was he really an elf?

"A-Ah! But before that, let me first guide our guests to their lodgings. The disturbance happened over there, so if you wish, you may go take a look…"

The moment Georg heard "over there," he was already heading in that direction.

When I first learned that this unhinged, sociopathic professor had once been part of the Hero's Party, I was beyond shocked.

But… I guess it was true. Seeing how the elder was acting so deferentially toward him.

As soon as he disappeared from sight, the students began murmuring among themselves.

"So that demon-looking guy actually looked like that?"

"Now that I think about it… I kind of want to attend his lectures again."

The elder and a few elves desperately tried to regain the students' attention, but it seemed their voices were drowned out by the excited chatter.

"...It's noisy."

"A-Ah, yeah. I guess it makes sense. I never imagined that demon-like professor would look like that…"

I assumed Dogeon was referring to Georg in a figurative sense, rather than mentioning Sikari.

Watching his dazed expression, I made sure to commit it to memory.

His bulging eyes, his slack jaw—it was a hilarious sight. After thoroughly engraving the image in my mind, I turned my attention to the elves still trying to regain control.

"I don’t like noise."

"Huh?"

Leaving Dogeon dumbfounded, I thought of the others who stood beside him.

I can’t forgive them. Even if I have to kill them all, I’ll take him back.

Just remembering it wasn’t enough to silence everyone. I had to think of something extreme.

When I opened my eyes again, all eyes were on me.

…It was overwhelming, but this was their fault for being so loud in the first place.

Still, I liked the silence. Now, the only sound was the rustling of leaves in the wind.

"…Ahem. Now, now, everyone! I know you’re excited, but shouldn’t we settle in first?"

Sensing the opportunity, Cecilia quickly intervened, drawing their attention away from me.

Some people were still staring, but… let them.

What could they even do to me?

Ignoring the still-stunned Dogeon, I grabbed his wrist and dragged him along. Cecilia shot me a complicated look, but I had no reason to care.

As expected of a place called the Great Forest, even the lodgings were made of trees. And I wasn't speaking metaphorically—trees had literally grown into the shape of buildings, creating an eerily bizarre landscape.

"…There aren't any bugs, are there?"

Even if there were, I could just tell them to stay away, and they'd understand. But just knowing that those things were nearby was enough to make my skin crawl.

I hadn't minded them as a child, but now? Just the sight of them existing in the same space as me was disgusting.

Except for spiders. They barely moved and ate other bugs, so they got a pass.

I tossed my bag aside without care and went to check on Dogeon.

Anyone who tried to stare at me or strike up a conversation would scurry away the moment I glanced at them. It was ridiculously convenient.

Before, that kind of reaction would've hurt me. But now? I couldn't care less.

Because now, there was someone truly important to me. Whatever the weeds by the roadside had to say didn't matter in the slightest.

Since the buildings were made of living trees, they were far smaller than the academy dormitories. I had to walk a bit since Dogeon and I were assigned

to different buildings.

I'd expected the presence of the oldest World Tree to make the air feel crisp and refreshing, but instead, the thick mana it exuded made me frown. Still, I had something I'd swiped from Dogeon's locker, so it wasn't unbearable.

Huh. That's strange. I thought World Trees were supposed to release magical energy, not just raw mana.

That aside, the cool scent of the forest and the breeze that swept through my hair made for a pleasant walk, even in the middle of summer.

Humans are like machines—they need to move every now and then to avoid rusting. And in a few days, I'd be moving a lot.

Last time, I'd lost control and been a little inconsiderate. This time, I'd match his pace.

I reached the tree that housed his room, smiling at the thought. Third floor, room 306, was it?

I knocked, but there was no response.

There weren't any security wards or anything, so I could've just opened the door. But on the off chance that he was changing, I pressed my ear against the door to check.

Aside from Yeonho meowing, I couldn't hear anything.

…Where did she go?

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 110

Chapter 110: The Great Forest (1)

So this was the Great Forest of the elves—once only a setting in the story.

Like a country bumpkin visiting the city for the first time, I was too busy taking in the scenery, feeling a thrill of excitement.

The air still carried a lingering sense of disorder, but that couldn't be helped.

When I asked what had happened, an elf told me that a large group of them had suddenly fallen asleep all at once.

No one knew the cause. And near the Mother World Tree, nearly everyone had collapsed—it was practically a wasteland of slumber. That must've been why the atmosphere felt so uneasy. The elf explained only that much before hurrying off to help with the situation.

Even considering that unsettling incident, the place was breathtakingly beautiful.

Lush greenery surrounded me on all sides, flowers bloomed in chaotic splendor, and butterflies fluttered freely, carried by the wind. It was the kind of place that made me think, If anywhere could be paradise, it'd be here.

Even Hoyeon would have to acknowledge its beauty—though she'd probably compare it to her homeland in the end.

Lost in thought, I wandered aimlessly until I realized I had no idea where I was.

Still, I wasn’t too worried. If I grabbed anyone nearby and asked, they’d be happy to point me in the right direction.

The elves' unusual kindness toward humans had been vaguely hinted at in the original story. There was speculation that the goddess had created them as a helper race for humanity, and Georg had outright said he was tired of them acting like caretakers. Considering the elves' role in the story, it was practically confirmed.

The story never explicitly stated it, but it was clear—the goddess had made the elves for the sake of humans.

…Well, the real reason I was taking in the sights like this was because I might not get another chance.

I wasn’t sure of Jeongho’s exact personality, so I couldn’t be certain. But if war broke out, this place would almost certainly be destroyed.

I hoped there wouldn’t be a war. But that seemed unlikely.

After all, in a Q&A, Jeongho’s stated goal was a "world without conflict."

After much debate among readers, we concluded that this probably meant conquering the entire world so there would be no wars between nations.

And when someone asked the author, they confirmed it.

…Just what kind of place was the East? I still didn’t understand.

If only I could exhale all these complicated thoughts in a single sigh and be done with them.

“…Haah. Nothing ever goes the way I planned.”

Looking back, almost all of my plans from the start of the semester had failed.

The items I'd acquired turned out to be useless or weren't even in the expected locations. Events had changed, shifted, or disappeared entirely.

And most importantly, the relationships with the heroines had been doomed from the start.

At least things were smooth with Hoyeon… but practically speaking, it was a one-sided power dynamic.

Hoyeon just didn't realize she was in the dominant position.

"I'd like to hear what's been going wrong—if you don't mind sharing?"

Hearing someone respond to my muttering startled me, but what truly shocked me was who had spoken.

I swallowed back the scream rising to my throat and turned my head slowly.

Standing there with a relaxed smile was Gloria.

"…Gloria? Weren't you supposed to be resting?"

It had been less than a week since the Church publicly announced that the Saintess had awakened.

Could someone who had just regained consciousness really be up and about like this?

"That's why I am resting. What better place for recuperation than the Great Forest?"

"Ah… Well, that's true, but… really?"

Something about it felt like an excuse.

If she weren't an Apostle, I wouldn't be so suspicious. But since she was, there had to be a reason for her presence here.

"Are you suggesting I'm faking my condition?"

"N-No! I, uh… I hope you make a full recovery."

I didn’t want to get caught in some convoluted mess, so I decided to drop it and make a quick escape.

Besides, I had a feeling Hoyeon would be looking for me soon.

And keeping her waiting was never a good idea.

I turned to leave in a hurry, but Gloria called out, stopping me in my tracks.

"Wait a moment! If you’re not too busy, could you answer a question for me?"

I could ignore her and walk away, but that might seem suspicious.

With anyone else, it wouldn’t matter. But it wasn’t a good idea to act that way around someone from the Church.

"Of course. What is it?"

"It’s about Hoyeon. Since you’re close to her, I thought you might know. Has she… had any dealings with demons?"

My body tensed involuntarily at the question.

There was something I felt guilty about.

Her so-called ‘God’ was probably a demon.

…But that had nothing to do with the demons of this continent. Her god resided in the East.

And if I answered ‘yes,’ something bad would definitely happen.

But me? I had directly infused my body with demonic energy, even if it had been purified and diluted.

The fact that even the Saintess couldn’t tell meant that Georg must have been right about his methods.

But still, I couldn’t help feeling uneasy.

"…No. She has no connection to demons whatsoever."

But you know what?

I didn’t want to get involved in anything complicated anymore.

"I see. In that case… things will become more difficult. Thank you for your cooperation. Having a trustworthy ally like you is truly a blessing. Take care on your way."

…I’m really not that trustworthy.

I lie fairly often.

But whatever.

It’s unlikely we’ll cross paths again.

***

I hurried back to my room.

Inside, I found Hoyeon, sitting with an unmistakable aura of discontent, stroking Yeonho, who meowed in protest.

The room was neater than when I’d left it, which was… concerning.

Hoyeon lifted her gaze and fixed me with a stare.

"…Dogeon. Where have you been?"

Technically speaking, there was no rule saying I had to be in my room.

And she hadn’t explicitly told me to stay.

So if anyone should feel unjustly accused, it was me.

But looking at her, I couldn’t bring myself to argue.

Because beneath that annoyed expression, there was loneliness.

"I went for a walk. Thought I’d do some sightseeing. I should’ve left a note on the desk—sorry. I should’ve known you’d be looking for me."

Hoyeon, dissatisfied, continued stroking Yeonho until the poor thing let out a distressed cry.

She finally released him and then firmly grasped my hand.

"…Next time, tell me before you leave. I get lonely when I’m by myself."

"Alright, alright. But can you let go now? I think you’re about to break my hand."

"A-Ah… Sorry…!"

Phew. I really thought my hand might snap.

Not that it wouldn’t heal quickly.

Even after letting go, she wrapped her tail around my leg, as if reluctant to part.

At moments like this, it was hard to tell who was really in charge.

But the truth remained—Hoyeon still held absolute power over me.

She stared at me with an expectant look.

But this wasn’t the academy dorms. The soundproofing wasn’t perfect. And it was broad daylight.

"…Not now, Hoyeon. Let’s wait until night. If not then, another time. Got it?"

She clearly did not like that answer.

But at least I prevented her from broadcasting our business to the entire forest.

That was a win. A small one. But a win.

***

Georg—No, Elliot—was Examining the World Tree's Vicinity.

He despised the elven name he had been given.

And yet, ironically, there was a part of him that wished someone would call him by it.

Because in moments like this, he felt as though he had returned to the days when he never once doubted that he was the greatest.

A peerless genius.

A revolutionary in magical studies.

A Grand Mage.

These were the titles he had earned not as a warrior in the Hero's Party, but as a researcher.

Had the demons never invaded, he likely would have spent his life aiding the humans who worshiped him.

But his encounter with demons and the hero had changed everything.

From his body, in the most direct sense—To his very beliefs, in the most profound.

Why was it that he, and his kin, could never resist the presence of humans?

What was the reason?

To uncover it, he had embarked on an inquiry that seemed to have no end.

The structure of the body.

The nature of the mind.

The origins of the Goddess.

The fundamental connections between mana, divine power, and demonic energy.

The core link suggested by the formulae he had developed—formulas that allowed him to freely convert one force into another.

Everything pointed eastward.

The land the Goddess had described as being filled with demons and terrors.

A continent whose true nature remained utterly unknown.

Unfortunately, Baek Hoyeon was of little help.

Her outward appearance might have resembled theirs, but internally, she was entirely different from the indigenous people of the East.

Even he, reckless as he was, understood that dissecting her would lead to irreversible consequences.

If he could take her apart, his research would advance in leaps and bounds.

But that was not how he wanted his inquiry to conclude.

"…Then, I suppose I should pursue the only lead I have."

Something remained in the air.

It felt like demonic energy, but it wasn't.

A residual force of unknown origin, scattered in every direction.

Observing it, he realized—the situation might be even more serious than he had thought.

His first objective was to locate the source of the energy that formed mana, divine power, and demonic energy.

Because he had sensed this very power before—when fighting demons, back when he was still a mage in the Hero's Party.

"Elliot, have you discovered anything…?"

The elder cautiously inquired whether he had uncovered the truth.

Georg shook his head.

"Not enough to be certain, old man. If possible, can you seal off this area? I'll need at least a week to stay glued to this spot."

"…A blockade, you say. If that is what you wish, then so be it."

If my hypothesis is correct, then at the very least…

We need enough time for everyone to escape.

Muttering to himself, Georg silently resumed his preparations.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 111

111. The Great Forest (2)

“…Yes, I’m going. Let’s go! Please wait a moment, I’ll start here first… Anima, I’m counting on you!”

They had simply moved them to a place out of human sight, but cleanup efforts were still in full swing behind the scenes.

Cecilia had no idea how to awaken her kin who wouldn't respond to either physical or magical methods.

Using spirits seemed somewhat effective, but it took far too much time.

It took at least twenty minutes per person, so reviving the hundreds lying around would take forever.

As much as they were her kin, she was still a student, and she had been looking forward to enjoying herself. Yet things had turned out like this.

It would be a lie to say she didn’t mind. She desperately wished for a miracle to awaken everyone at once, but what greeted her instead were just more patients.

“…Phew, Ethan. Could you sprinkle some water on the one with the sky-blue hair over there?”

“There’s more than one person with sky-blue hair… and anyway, sprinkle, not feed? Do elves drink water through their skin or something?”

Ethan was doing what he could to help care for the patients, but he deeply felt how painfully short they were on staff.

He was so busy that the request sounded ridiculous, and he hesitated—was he really supposed to do that?

“Yes! Um… it’s a regressed function, so it normally doesn’t work well, but… we’re really short on hands right now. Please, I’m asking!”

Before he could ask anything more, Cecilia briskly walked off to another spot. The only thing left where she had stood was a floating spirit taking some sort of action.

“…Guess I’ll just sprinkle water over everyone here.”

Ethan had no way of knowing who exactly she had meant, so he picked up the sprayer and moistened them all.

At this point, it didn’t feel much different from watering plants.

He pushed the potentially offensive thought aside for now; another patient was brought in from somewhere, so he let out a deep sigh and carried them to a bed.

Ethan knew elves weren’t incompetent, so he couldn’t even begin to guess what kind of being had caused all this.

He ignored the oddly familiar but unplaceable scent lingering at the tip of his nose and focused on nursing.

But he couldn’t fully concentrate. Gloria’s words on the airship kept ringing in his ears.

Was it really going to end with just being collaborators? Cecilia had brushed it off with a hesitant “collaborators,” but he couldn’t settle on that.

She had given him the strength to climb out of his lowest point, and to someone like him, who lived only for his faith and the Order, she had shown the space to pause and take in the world.

It was too deep to simply call it “collaboration,” yet vague to take it any further. Gloria had seen his hesitation and smiled faintly, telling him to think deeply on it.

Maybe someone like her would be okay.

Elves couldn’t reproduce, but who said marriage had to be about having children? Wouldn’t it be enough to just live together with someone you love?

Ethan couldn’t make up his mind easily. Choosing her wouldn’t mean giving up his faith, but he probably wouldn’t be able to commit to it with the same passion anymore.

“…Ah! Ethan, I said the one with sky-blue hair! Why would you spray it on everyone?!”

Startled when the very person he’d been thinking of appeared, Ethan blurted out whatever came to mind.

“Ah, well… they all looked the same shade of blue to me…?”

“Ah, what kind of excuse is that?! This one’s teal, that one’s light teal! And this is sky-blue! It’s obvious to anyone!”

Ethan genuinely couldn’t tell the difference and felt wronged, but technically it was his fault for not asking sooner, and Cecilia’s fierce tone left him no room to argue.

In the end, he had to follow Cecilia around and learn to distinguish the various shades of elven hair color before he could be of any real help.

***

“…So, because of that, today’s scheduled activities are canceled, everyone. I’ll say it again—due to unforeseen accidents and safety concerns…”

They’d been told to gather, so she thought they might hear some grand announcement, but instead, it was just a roundabout way of saying they were being given free time due to the current situation.

It already felt that way, so being called out just to hear that felt pointless. Maybe it was thoroughness—or just annoying.

Dogeon looked a bit paler than earlier. Not that she minded—one less nuisance for her—but it clearly wasn’t the same for him.

“How… tragic this is. Truly unfortunate. But worry not. I don’t plan on doing anything… for now.”

She leaned on Dogeon’s back and whispered softly into his ear. Close enough that she could hear him gulp—and if she focused, maybe even his heartbeat.

…Oh, she could hear it. Thump, thump—a mix of excitement and fear. Well, to be fair, last time was a bit much. She kept going even though he begged her to stop, saying he still had the strength to talk.

“Ahahaha… I-I see. Thank you for your understanding…”

She pressed harder and slowly pushed him forward. It was strange, really. He had started the conversation, yet he was the one getting scared.

But more than that, something was bothering her as they wandered aimlessly.

“So? Any ideas for how to spend the time?”

So, what now? At the academy, there had at least been attractions like the zoo, botanical garden, library, and plenty of food from the cafeteria or snack shops.

But this place was dull to the point that there was practically nothing besides grass and trees.

She hadn't expected much from the food either.

A walk didn't seem like a great option. No matter where she looked, all she saw was more grass and trees—not exactly visually thrilling.

Even strange things were only interesting the first time. By the third, they got boring.

If they killed time by napping until night, they'd both definitely wake up the next morning. She could force herself up, but Dogeon was another story.

"There's not much to see… but still, there must be something. If we look around slowly, I'm sure we'll find something. Or we could ask Cecilia, since she's a local, if she knows anything fun to do."

That sounded like something he'd say. The usual "there's gotta be something, right?" kind of optimism. There probably was something… but how long could it really keep them entertained?

"Yeah, probably. It's certainly full of strange things. Like the Mother… was it the World Tree? Should we head there first?"

"I heard it's actually off-limits for now. They say the cause of the chaos is there, so only selected people can approach it."

"Lovely. The biggest attraction in this barren place is practically gone, too."

It really felt like false advertising. She'd at least expected fresh air, but nope. Couldn't even get close to the World Tree. Might as well have stayed on the island.

"…How fantastic. Then let's go find that grass-smelling girl. Though… do you know where she is?"

Cecilia seemed like the obvious person to go to, but she hadn't shown up since that initial guidance, so they had no clue where she was.

“Uhh… no, I don’t, haha…”

Great. They didn’t even know where their guide was.

“Then… first priority is finding where that grass-scented girl is.”

“…She’s probably wherever they’re keeping the collapsed people? She likes helping others, so I imagine she’s assisting with the aftermath over there.”

Now that she mentioned it, it did make sense. They still didn’t know exactly where that place was, but when they stopped a passerby and asked, the person stammered and pointed the way, so they got there quickly.

***

“…This is bad.”

“I agree. Are you saying… all these collapsed people?”

Even though it was a fairly large clearing, there were so many elves lying on the ground that you had to walk carefully to avoid stepping on them. Some people were moving busily in the distance, tending to them, but the number of helpers was far too few.

“…Oh? Dogeon? And Hoyeon…? What are you doing here… Ah! You’re stepping on someone’s hair!”

Oops. She had been careful, but there were just too many. Dodging them was harder than avoiding ginkgo leaves on the ground.

“…We were going to ask if there was anywhere fun to go, but… clearly not the time for that.”

“Ah, yes. As you can see, we’re really short on hands with this many people. And… well, it’s awkward to say, but there really isn’t much for outsiders to enjoy…”

Basically, if you're not busy, please help us. That's what she meant. The way she avoided eye contact with Hoyeon and spoke only to Dogeon really didn't sit well.

What bothered her even more was that Dogeon didn't seem like he would refuse. She could tell he was glancing between her and the patients, clearly torn.

"…Lady Hoyeon… would it be alright?"

Sigh. Came here to have fun, and now they were doing nursing. Well, at least time would pass quickly.

"Why ask me? Do as you please. If you do it, I'll join in."

"Really?! Thank you, Lady Hoyeon! I know it's a lot to ask, but could you please start with the people around here…?!"

Cecilia ran off to tend to other patients the moment she assumed Dogeon had agreed—without even confirming it.

"…I, um, I'm sorry, Lady Hoyeon. You really don't need to do such troublesome work…"

"Enough. It's not about the trouble. I just didn't like seeing you fawn over another girl. Now, let's get started."

But what were they even supposed to do? Just try shaking them awake? She hadn't explained the most important part before running off, so there was no telling what to actually do.

Dogeon and Cecilia were both hard at work already, and she didn't want to just stand there, so she figured she might as well try something.

…Shaking should work, right?

As soon as she touched the elf, she felt something strangely familiar and completely out of place. A pure, untainted magical energy.

Not divine will, not human distortion—just raw nature.

Why is this… inside them? Before she could even finish the thought, the mana flowed into her body. Not that anything seemed wrong, but it had never entered her before, no matter how hard she tried—why now?

While her questions kept piling up, the cherry on top was the elf suddenly springing to their feet.

You've got to be kidding me.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 112

112. The Great Forest (3)

“A star has come…! The end!! Is… here…!”

The elf, who suddenly shot up like they had been shocked by electricity, screamed something incomprehensible at a deafening volume—something about the end times—and then collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

…Uh. So, what I did just now was… I just touched them, right? So then…

What the hell is going on here? For some reason, there was mana inside the elf, and then it suddenly got absorbed, and they jolted upright before flopping down again.

Anyway, it didn’t seem like it was my fault. Something clearly happened when I touched them, but it’s not like I did anything wrong, right? While I was rationalizing it that way, I heard the sound of many footsteps thundering toward me from a distance.

The near-silent footfalls of the elf caretakers, the heavier thud of Ethan’s boots, the light but somehow unsteady steps of the grass-scented girl…

And then there was that weighty, but not sluggish rhythm—the kind that brought peace of mind. That sound was his.

“Did something happen?! Why would anyone mention the end?!”

“What’s going on! Are we under attack?!”

“Hoyeon! Are you alright?!”

As expected, Dogeon was the only one truly thinking of me. Other elves came flapping over in all kinds of ridiculous manners asking what happened, but none of them compared—Dogeon really was the best.

“I’m fine, and I have no idea what happened. I swear on Mother's name, all I did was touch them and this happened.”

I threw that out preemptively, drawing the line before the church lot started getting annoying. This way, they wouldn’t dare mess with me.

Saying something that would automatically make them garbage if they argued made the church folks hesitate to touch the subject, and they just observed the situation cautiously.

“Uh… pulse is normal, and they seem to have come out of the deep sleep… What on earth happened? And why would they say something like ‘the end’...?”

“They must’ve had a nightmare or something. Now, is that all?”

Cecilia, in a panic, used some mana to check the condition of the one who had just convulsed. Thankfully, both for me and the elf, they had simply shifted from the coma to a normal sleep state. That was a relief.

Thank goodness. I didn’t screw it up this time.

“It’s good that it was nothing serious. Someone suddenly shouting about the end… had us thinking something terrible happened. But you’re saying all you did was touch them?”

Dogeon was clearly worried about me, but it looked like he was also curious about how that happened. I had explained it directly, but I guess seeing is believing.

“Yes. If you really don’t believe me, shall I do it again?”

“Huh? No, there’s no need for tha—”

Ah, I can’t hear you~. Dogeon looked a bit skeptical, so I’d just have to show him directly. Even as he flailed his hands and insisted there was no need, I had already made up my mind.

Just in time, I spotted a young elf girl nearby and reached out to her. Ethan and Cecilia both went pale, summoning spirits and whatever else to prepare for what might happen next.

And they call themselves believers—where’s the faith? Look, it’s just like this...

“…Ah, urgh. Oh, star above… I haven’t finished my assignment!! Please give me a bit more time!!! Plea…se…”

As expected, she raved dramatically about stars and whatnot, then collapsed from exhaustion. The mana embedded in her body was conveniently extracted as well.

“See that? I really only touched her. What exactly did you think I was?”

I gave the elf who had slumped into my arms a gentle push so she would fall back to her original spot. Ethan and Cecilia, who had finally come to their senses, checked her condition and confirmed she was fine.

“…It’s true. Just a touch and she came out of the coma… What in the world is going on…?”

“I don’t know. But I do know this much. Lady Hoyeon, would you be willing to go around and touch each of the elves here just once?”

Cecilia still looked too flustered to think, but Ethan’s mind seemed to be working. He politely asked me if I could awaken everyone present.

“…I wouldn’t mind, but you know? I’m more curious whether the child standing next to you will give me permission.”

I let a little smugness show, working out a bit of the annoyance that had piled up from being stalked all this time. Dogeon gave me a somewhat chastising look, but he didn't say anything.

"Uh… ah, yes. I'd appreciate it as well! Please… save our people from this sleep…!"

Cecilia became more desperate, kneeling down to beg. Now that's more like it. It's way more satisfying to help someone who asks sincerely. I was going to help anyway, but now I'd do it with a little more care.

Yes, I'd do it one by one. Originally, I'd planned to just tap their foreheads with both hands or something, but that would seem too half-hearted.

"Hmm, very well. If you're that sincere. Dogeon? This might take a while… is that alright?"

It wasn't exactly what he had said to me before, but it was close enough to return the favor.

"If Lady Hoyeon is doing it, how could I possibly object? Just… please don't overdo it. You might get hurt."

Dogeon always worried too much. It was a wise attitude, sure… but sometimes I wished he could just enjoy the moment as it was.

"Alright, I'll be careful. You lot standing around doing nothing—what are you waiting for? Get ready to help."

The elves, who had been frozen like statues in shock, finally scrambled to prepare to assist at my command.

Well then, shall we begin? I wonder how long this will take.

***

Hahaha, Seonhak. Are you still afraid? The very one who struck a blow to that one and led the people beyond the barrier?

No, I'm not teasing. I'm just surprised. When I first heard the stories, I thought you were like another star altogether. And yet, here you are, still so human, insisting on walking a human's path as a human.

I never imagined that someone with such lofty ideals would be this human! This humble junior truly finds their eyes opened wide.

I never thought you'd be so cornered as to link your mind with your creations just to gather information. Not to mention the part about unfinished assignments…

The "end times," asking for an extension… I had no idea your mind was still stuck in the academy. You must not have thought it through when you escaped, hmm?

Ah, of course I jest. How many chances does a lesser junior like me get to poke fun at someone as brilliant as you? Haha, don't get too angry now.

…Good grief, all this noise from outside during our academic exchange. Hard to concentrate like this. That one out there seems to be outside your control, yes?

"By coincidence," you say… How very human of you. Created by coincidence, huh. So, you're saying it surpassed its limits without any control at all?

Ah, I'm just talking to myself. Anyway, let's go back to the jesting. I thought you had created a new type of power, but it turns out you merely degraded something that already existed.

Mana… was it? It's not much different from watering down fuel. No, it's true—it's far too much for ordinary humans to handle.

In that case, why not simply improve the human body? Why cling to a backward physique? Ah, right—you did say you wanted to remain human. I almost forgot.

And that divine power… You didn't just water it down, you added sawdust too. You were really going all in to kill us, weren't you? And yet, the fact that it's harmless to humans—that's so very you, Seonhak.

Had you stayed, you might already be sailing the cosmos. Ah, but of course —that's just a hypothetical.

Really now. No matter how brilliant you are, you could use better manners. I am your elder, after all. Would it kill you to add a "" to my name?

…Ahem. I keep getting distracted. Oh, what did I do to the Star's Child, you ask?

Nothing much. That person's child seemed uneasy wandering such a cruel and barren land with only a few guards, you see.

Looks like Byeolbi locked it up, but didn't say not to release it. So I just released a tiny bit. What's inside seems a little unstable, after all.

No, it wasn't intentional. I didn't expect that child to show interest in your creation. Who would've thought it'd happen while tailing some strange outsider boy?

Who could've known she'd absorb the thing used to put them to sleep?

And what is that boy, you ask? Funny—looks like you and I have something in common for once, Seonhak. I don't know. What is he? Judging by your question, he's not your work.

…Well, if you're letting him be, he must not be dangerous.

Since you're letting him be.

***

I heard all kinds of nonsense. Stuff like "I'll fail this semester" or "I'll have to retake the course." The voices sounded oddly familiar, but so jumbled I couldn't make sense of them.

The sun had been high in the sky, but by the time I was finally freed, darkness was beginning to fall over the forest.

Though we'd managed to rouse them from their comas, the elves still hadn't fully regained their senses and would need to rest a while longer. As Dogeon had worried, no one got hurt.

"…I never imagined serving others could be this exhausting. I owe the maids and my sister back home an apology…"

"Sounds like you had quite the glamorous childhood. Still, I'm glad it ended okay."

Thankfully, I didn't have to embarrass myself by telling Dogeon about things like jumping off desks or charging into rivers as a kid.

But it didn't exactly end without incident. My body was now overflowing with mana. I didn't know what I could do with it yet, but I felt full of energy.

At this rate, I really might not get tired anymore.

Still, I needed food. My stomach was rumbling, and the timing was perfect for dinner.

"Well then, shall we head to dinner? While the church folks are busy cleaning up, I bet the feast will taste even better."

Snacks always tasted the best when you were off in a corner while everyone else was running around working. I was reminiscing with a twisted smile when Dogeon threw a comment at me.

"…Lady Hoyeon. Do you realize you sometimes say terrifying things like it's nothing?"

"That's scary? Oh please. Hurry up and follow me. Even you'll get left behind if you're too slow, got it?"

There was no need to think or figure out where to go. People were already lining up and heading somewhere.

We followed along, spirits high, and arrived at the cafeteria—only to find it full of nothing but greens.

This place was hell.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 113

113. The Great Forest (4)

Even when I tried not to breathe through my nose, the smell of grass was so thick it felt like I might suffocate. The overwhelming mana inside my body had resolved the discomfort from the air, but this wasn't something that could be fixed with mana.

I clung to the hope that maybe it was just a dream—that maybe there'd be a dish so packed with vegetables that it actually hid the scent of meat—but there was no such miracle. Over here, greens. Over there, more greens. Even when I looked away in disappointment, all I saw was more grass. It was so unbearable I shut my eyes tight.

This couldn't be real. No, this shouldn't be real.

Dogeon, perhaps trying to cheer me up, called out to me after spotting a certain dish.

"…Lady Hoyeon! Would you care to come see this? They say it's plant-based meat, but it's so convincing I couldn't tell the difference!"

I appreciated the effort. At least by human standards, it seemed indistinguishable from real meat. Sadly, that didn't apply to me.

The overpowering stench of greens, which no amount of seasoning or cooking could fully mask, still wafted off it. I was grateful for Dogeon's

effort, but it just wasn't going to work. I shook my head quietly.

"…It may look like meat to you, but to me, it's just more greens. Thank you for thinking of me. But I'll either have to starve or find something else."

Perhaps out of the elves' last bit of decency, there were some tofu-like items or jelly-like foods available. At the very least, those were edible, so I figured I'd fill my stomach with them.

Sigh. Isn't there anything resembling a meat dish around here? As soon as I thought that, a bit of mana leaked out of my body. Considering it never entered me even when I tried, I guess it's not strange that it would leak out too.

As I trudged toward a table gloomily, an irresistibly alluring scent brushed past the tip of my nose.

Had there been a table like that? It was shoved way into a dark corner, with not a soul nearby, and barely any lighting—yet my nose still picked it up.

I mean, the scent of meat was that strong. There was no way I wouldn't notice. It was strange, sure, but my feet were already moving toward it.

The table was barely big enough to hold a single plate, and even on that plate was just barely a human-sized portion of meat.

It wasn't nearly enough to satisfy me, but… meat was meat. It was far better than nothing. Just the fact that I didn't have to chew on grass and its assorted by-products filled me with joy.

"…Princess? I was wondering where you went, and here you are—what are you doing in a place like this? There's nothing over here. You won't get meat just by staring at a wall… huh?"

Dogeon must've thought I was just staring at a wall and came to fetch me—but when I actually came back with meat, he looked absolutely stunned.

"It's not a wall. Can't you see the table right there? From now on, try to eat more carrots or animal liver. They help with night vision, you know?"

Only after I kindly pointed out the direction with my finger did Dogeon finally manage to see the table.

“…That definitely wasn’t there before… What in the world…”

Just because he didn’t see it. Dogeon denied it, saying no such thing was there. To be honest, I had my doubts too… but I didn’t have the mental room to dwell on them.

The simple fact that meat existed was enough to make me happy.

“What are you standing around like an idiot for? Come on, let’s sit down. It’ll get cold.”

Well, it was already cold. But judging by the faint warmth beneath the plate, it was probably just at the point before cooling completely. I understood Dogeon was shocked, but I didn’t have time to humor him.

“Ah, right. But where did that even come from…? There weren’t any cloaking spell circuits or anything like that…”

Ugh, so many questions. I gave him a sharp look and smacked the back of his knee with my tail as if to say just follow me already. Only then did Dogeon stop hesitating and tag along.

What’s good is good, no? Dogeon might not agree, but I sure did.

Taste-wise, it didn’t compare to the food at the academy. But after being stuck in a place overflowing with greens, this actually felt delicious.

“…Is it good?”

“It’s delightful. Just the thought of having to gnaw on more leaves had me depressed. You should eat up too. Though I’m not sure that green stuff will do anything for your strength. But you’ll need your strength, won’t you?”

“Haha… Right.”

No matter how you looked at it, I doubted that grass stuff could fuel a human body. I should probably pack a few pills for him before things kick off again. They work instantly, though the rebound is a bit rough—but Dogeon should be fine.

More than anything, he needs his strength, right?

***

The moment I regained consciousness, I tried to sit up, but a strange weight and a wave of dizziness kept me down. I glanced out the window, trying to gauge the time—it was just before sunrise.

What was pressing down on my chest? Relying on the faint pre-dawn light, I looked and saw soft hair, mostly white with streaks of black.

Ah. Right. Hoyeon.

They'd said I might be a bit confused upon waking due to the aftereffects of the medicine—and this must've been it. She was lying across my chest, nuzzling against me in blissful sleep, completely bare.

Looks like she'd fallen asleep with her chest still pressed to mine. I nearly got aroused again, but the sharp pain stopped me and made me groan softly.

"Ugh… ah…"

Whether it was rotting or crushed, the pain felt like it would explode with just a touch. I couldn't even speak, but thankfully, the urge subsided.

I forced my stiff limbs to move, but as soon as I did, she clung to me tighter, burrowing in even deeper like she didn't want to let go. Her nails scratched at me, but that didn't matter much.

Trying to get up, it felt like my lower back was about to snap. It was like shards of glass were embedded in my muscles, grinding as I moved.

Even though I had healed myself once with magic, the pain remained.

Still, the fact that I could move meant that Hoyeon must've shown me some mercy. I really thought I was going to die at first. My vision had gone dark, and every time she moved, it felt like my whole body was burning.

Compared to that, this was a lot better. Back then, too, I'd woken up before her, only to be paralyzed and pass out again.

I gently pulled her off me, laid her down on the bed, and went to the bathroom. Turning on the light to wash up, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror—and it wasn't pretty.

Scratched here, bitten there, with dried fluids all over. I didn't know if this place even had cleaning staff, but if they did, I pitied them.

If I looked like this, I didn't even want to imagine the state of the bed. At least it was just the bed that got wrecked—there was some comfort in that.

I treated the minor injuries with magic and splashed cold water on my face to snap out of it. I still had no idea how they made a shower room in a tree, but I was in too much pain to wonder for long.

From what I could tell, the water was conjured with mana, and where the drainage led… who knew.

It hurt too much all over to care.

Even after I finished washing up, she was still fast asleep. But she might wake up and look for me, so maybe I should wait...

No. I'll wake her up.

Up close, she looked truly beautiful. She wasn't the most considerate of others, and her standards were abnormally high—but none of that mattered right now.

She smiled in her sleep, like she was dreaming something pleasant. I leaned in and whispered her name softly in her ear.

"Hoyeon…?"

As if tickled or as if to say don't call me that, her ear twitched. Then she slowly stirred, blinking sleepily.

She stayed still for a while, like her mind hadn't quite caught up, then eventually brushed her hair back and noticed me, smiling faintly.

"Haa…mm, you're up… early? Mm, haaah…"

As she stretched, the blanket I'd pulled over her slipped off, revealing her bare body, and the sultry moan she let out made it feel like my lower half might snap again.

"Ugh… yeah. I woke up first… Are you okay…?"

Showing herself off like that—it was too much. But I had to hold it in. As much as I wanted to, my body couldn't handle it.

"Me? Yeah… I feel great."

So she really had gone easy on me. I was dying, and she was talking about feeling refreshed. It was clear now. Honestly, I was getting scared of the future.

I don't know if it's fair to say this about her, but isn't this exactly what a succubus is? Irresistibly alluring, yet ruinous if you get involved.

She didn't actually ruin me, and she had no intention to—but still, I couldn't shake the feeling that if I were to die, it wouldn't be of old age, but under her.

"Well… either way, you should probably get washed up. Just a heads-up, the warm water doesn't really come out."

"Got it~" She said, casually grabbing just her underwear and walking straight into the bathroom. I wasn't really afraid of her anymore, but her stamina still scared me a little.

While she washed up, I changed the sheets and straightened the room up a bit. It helped me move around and clear my head too.

My upper body was relatively fine, aside from the claw marks. The real problem was below the waist—it felt completely wrecked. But I managed.

She'd left some ointment out for me to use if I was sore the next day, so I slathered it everywhere and drank some water. Not long after, she came out wearing just her underwear.

She naturally sat beside me and draped her tail across my thigh as a signal, but if we kept going, I'd definitely lose a whole day—so I gently stroked her tail while respectfully moving it aside.

"…Don't want to?"

"It's not that I don't want to. My body just can't take it. By the way… did you take the medicine?"

"Oh, right. I almost forgot…"

Hoyeon. If you forget that, I don't know what your father might do to me. Please be more careful.

She didn't look satisfied, but I had only one idea for something we could do together right now, so I suggested it.

"…Hoyeon. Want to go for a walk?"

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 114

114.The Great Forest (5)

The damp early-morning air brushed against my skin, and it felt a little cold. It was just shy of being clammy, but the scent of the forest mixed into it made it not all that unpleasant.

More than anything, Dogeon was beside me. At this hour, the only ones walking around were a handful of guards, so there was no need to worry about prying eyes. That alone felt nice.

When I looked up at the sky, I could still faintly see the stars, and in the east, the dark sky was slowly turning blue as the sun prepared to rise.

"…It's refreshing. Unlike the academy, you can really feel that we're out in nature. Hoyeon, how about you?"

"I don't really care, as long as I'm with you."

I'd probably be fine even if we were standing in a vortex of divine energy. Not that Dogeon would ever take me somewhere like that. Just saying, of course.

"I see. But still, don't you have a preference? Like… do you like the sea, the mountains, the plains, or cities? I'm kind of curious about that."

Ah. So that's what you wanted to know. If that's the question, I could answer right away.

“Home. Or indoors. Anywhere that’s not outside—I like those kinds of places. It’s not like I hate the outdoors, but I don’t particularly want to go out either. That is… unless you ask me to.”

People don’t really change. Even if I were reborn, I’d still be a homebody. When I was little, I ran around outside because I couldn’t control my energy—not because I liked being outside.

Though, to be fair, I did have fun. Still, that’s how it is.

“Oh… really? Then maybe we should look for things to do indoors from now on…”

“No, you don’t need to adjust to me. Like I said, as long as you’re there, I’m happy.”

As we bickered back and forth over who should accommodate whom, I couldn’t help but laugh. It was silly—fussing over something so trivial while trying to be thoughtful toward each other.

“Why are you laughing? This is an important matter.”

“Ahaha, sorry, khmph… You’re right. It is important… pfft, hehe…”

I hadn’t expected him to take something so minor so seriously—it was cute. And I could feel how sincere he was, which warmed my heart. I knew I could never expect this kind of relationship from my mother or father.

Not that I disliked either of them, but…

They weren’t the type you could have these kinds of pointless conversations with.

Father was warm, but always busy. Mother was philosophical and always asked me difficult questions.

So it was these mundane, unimportant moments that felt all the more precious.

After spending some time arguing over nothing at all, Dogeon finally sighed and gave up.

Too bad—it was fun. I thought about teasing him a little more, but decided against it. No point in risking a bad mood just for that. After a while of chatting, we fell into silence. Maybe that felt awkward, because Dogeon suddenly asked me something.

"…Hoyeon. Yesterday—you held back for my sake, didn't you?"

Why's he bringing that up outside? Even if no one's around, I'd prefer he ask those kinds of embarrassing things indoors.

Still, he wasn't wrong. I'd gone too far last time, so this time I paced myself to match his tempo. I even pretended to give in to boost his confidence… Maybe that was a little too obvious?

"…Yeah. Last time, you almost di—"

I was about to tell the truth when I felt something strange ahead of us, and I cut myself off. Dogeon must've sensed it too—he was looking in the same direction as me.

Standing there was Iris. But she didn't look normal in the slightest. Her eyes were bloodshot, her legs trembling, yet she stood there, staring blankly up at the sky like she was possessed.

Then, as if she'd sensed us, her head twisted toward us in a motion far too unnatural. Her eyes, swollen and red, and her cracked, dried lips looked like she'd been like that for quite some time.

"…Lady Iris? Are you alright?"

Dogeon stepped in front of me to assess her condition, but to me, that wasn't Iris anymore. Not really.

Her eyes had gone pitch black—like my mother's—as if they were staring into the night sky itself.

“Who are you? You carry my presence… but who are you?”

Then she started spouting nonsense. I couldn’t make heads or tails of what she was saying, nor who it was even directed at.

“…Iris? Is that you?”

Dogeon, too, must have sensed that this wasn’t Iris. He surrounded himself with mana and tried to get an answer from her again. But, of course, there was no way that would work.

“I speak to you from afar, through this small vessel. I sense my presence within you. Yet I did not create you. Then what are you? There exists no record of interference. What are you? Who are you?”

Her lips didn’t even move. Her mouth just hung open, yet somehow the words echoed directly in my head in Korean, which made me doubt whether it was even spoken aloud.

Her movements were erratic. Blood was now trickling from her eyes, but her heart was still beating. She wasn’t in danger of dying.

Still, judging by the sounds coming from her body, she’d collapse from exhaustion before long.

“…Hoyeon, step back—Hoyeon? Wait, this is dangerous!”

“No, it’s not. She’d probably collapse if you so much as touched her.”

There was nothing swirling around Iris. Her appearance was unsettling, sure, but that alone wouldn’t scare me. I’m the type who doesn’t even flinch at horror games or ghosts.

…Honestly, people talking while alive is scarier. I’d prefer they stay dead.

“I am Baek Hoyeon. And you—what are you? How dare you claim to carry a presence like mine?”

No way Iris had gone insane. She's terrified of me—she could lose her mind out of fear, but if she had, I doubt she'd fail to recognize me.

"I have no name. Only a mission. To observe, not to interfere. Then what are you? Why do you carry my presence?"

As Iris staggered toward us, Dogeon tried to stop her. But I held him back. He looked like he still wanted to intervene, but… he must've trusted me enough to step aside.

I could still tell he was ready to jump in the moment something went wrong, but sure—stay ready like that.

I knew it was dangerous. But I wanted to know what that was.

It stopped right in front of me and stared into my eyes. I stared right back. Not that doing so would tell me anything.

It looked like there were constellations inside its eyes… but that was about it. I wasn't some technician or a magic researcher or anything.

"…Was it created by a fragment that broke off from me? I thought it was destroyed."

With those final words, the thing possessing Iris left her. I mean, she lost consciousness and collapsed right after saying that.

"She seems to be alright. Still, I'd prefer if we didn't have heart-stopping moments like that again. More importantly…"

Once Dogeon confirmed I was unharmed, he turned his attention to Iris. Unlike the church types, he had his priorities straight.

He lifted her with concern in his eyes, but to me, she didn't look that bad. If I were being objective, I'd say she was in the kind of condition where you could just drag her by the hair.

…Well. That's just the kind of person Dogeon is. I couldn't really fault him for it. I already knew what he was going to say, so I simply walked ahead to

where he was headed.

It was also my way of silently protesting how excessively he was coddling Iris.

***

When Iris came to, it was already midday.

The last thing she remembered was looking at the stars from her room window—so waking up in a place filled with elves left her bewildered.

“Ah, you’re awake? Honestly, when they brought you in, we thought you were dead. To summarize, Lady Iris, you collapsed from severe fatigue. According to their testimony, you were standing outside, staring at the stars until dawn. Do you remember anything?”

She shook her head at Cecilia’s explanation. The only thing she remembered was one particularly bright red star. But then, a memory she didn’t experience suddenly surfaced in her mind.

“…‘They,’ you said? Wasn’t Lady Hoyeon the only one there?”

In her memory, she’d had a strange conversation with Hoyeon. But “they”? Was someone else there?

“Dogeon brought you here. Didn’t you see him?”

But in her memory, there had been only Hoyeon. No one else.

“No… I only saw Lady Hoyeon.”

Cecilia tilted her head in confusion.

“Hmm… that’s strange. After you collapsed, maybe Lady Hoyeon called for Dogeon and had him bring you here…?”

They put their heads together, but without the people involved to explain, they could only conclude that they didn’t know.

Not that it really mattered much. It wasn’t especially dangerous. And since Iris was technically a patient, she lay back down on the bed.

Outside seemed oddly noisy—but that, too, was none of her concern.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 115

115. The Great Forest (6)

I found out. It had seen not my child, but the me that lay beyond.

From the moment I bore a child, I had known this day would come—but I hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

Unlike when I pulled Black Wolf from a parallel world, this was something of an entirely different magnitude. I'd long expected it would occur one day. And even if I were discovered, it would not disrupt my plan.

After all, I had only ever acted as a bystander and a drifter. This star would not disappear. Even if it had developed abnormally due to me, the veil that concealed it remained intact—and that veil was still holding strong.

Even if my true form bordered on omnipotence, it was not without flaws. And since I had once been that true form, I had simply exploited its flaws.

The veil blanketing the surface of the star served to conceal the continent's abnormal rate of development while simultaneously displaying a fast-progressing civilization that wouldn't arouse the true body's suspicion.

Give it a few hundred years, and the veil's progression speed would catch up to that of the continent it hid. When that time came, the veil would naturally lift. By then, I would no longer be here.

That was fine. The continent could now sustain itself without me. In a few thousand years, humankind would finally part from its nanny god and the cradle of maternal care, setting sail for the vast, cold sea of stars.

I had hoped to bid them farewell with my own hands. But that would likely prove impossible.

Before that, I would either be retrieved or eliminated by the true body. I did not feel sorrow or resentment. Merely regret—that I would no longer be able to see it through.

I severed the line connected to my child and turned my gaze to the many mirrors around me. The conditions were identical to when I had rescued Black Wolf—no remarkable results still.

I had simulated countless times the scenario in which humanity, after being improved beyond its primitive body, reclaimed its free will. So many simulations, in fact, that it became foolish to count.

The result was always the same.

Destruction.

Fragmented into countless nations, repeating conflict; flailing in the face of disaster; advancing weapons instead of science; depleting resources; lacking the technology to deflect asteroid collisions.

Abandoning progress, regressing civilization; swept up in self-destructive religions and ideologies; undone by creations they could no longer control —among countless other reasons.

It was what happened when they were allowed to act freely, without a single powerful unifying force. There were some optimistic projections, but far too few to stake everything on.

Even those didn’t compare to the current status quo.

Even my child seemed unable to find a definitive answer. And after fleeing, Canaan had remained completely silent.

I'd even summoned an outsider, wondering if one might hold the answer—

…but my child had blended far too much to be called an outsider anymore.

Someone from the outside world had written a work of imagination that happened to align with this one, creating a pathway for the summoned—but even that one seemed to have no clear answer.

I couldn't wait for Canaan's answer forever. Regrettably, I would have to remove her. Luckily, her partner had finished tidying up the continent, so I could give him the heads-up.

That beyond this world, there were those who would soon raise their swords against us.

***

A mass of soldiers charged through the darkness. Despite carrying gear, they moved with inhuman speed, vaulting over obstacles as they followed a single man's lead.

"Captain. Wake up. I see the forest ahead. We're almost there."

A soldier behind him spoke up, but the man at the front replied irritably.

"…Mm. Huh? Ahem, I know, damn it. I've got eyes too."

"You fell asleep running last time and slammed into a wall. What kind of subordinate would I be if I let you make the same mistake again?"

"Hey, hey, that was ages ago… You think I'm a kid who'd repeat the same mistake? Commander sir, how are the others doing?"

"Don't change the subject, Captain. You almost tripped on a rock just now."

"…Okay, that was close. Sheesh, fine. Hey, boys! Can you still keep running?"

The man gave up arguing and turned to check on his troops. Running nonstop for twenty-four hours would be extreme for most beastfolk.

“No problem, sir!”

The booming reply made the man grin. Of course—no one here was “most beastfolk.”

Even his old commander was going strong. That confirmed it.

“Alright, then today—we meet the lady. Crush anything in your way, but don’t kill! Move out, beasts! The lady is waiting!”

With the sound of the wind being torn, the figures vanished into the shadows.

***

When I traced the source of the noise, I found Black Wolf staging a hostage situation with a group of guards in tow.

…You’ve got to be kidding me. I caught a whiff of a familiar scent and ran over in a hurry, only to discover the exact worst-case scenario had already unfolded.

Dogeon had tried to follow me, but I told him to stay behind and strode straight up to Black Wolf. This time, I couldn’t just let it go.

“…So, you're telling me you rampaged your way here, destroying everything in your path. That’s what you're saying right now?”

I confronted him sternly, visibly annoyed. But as usual, he responded shamelessly.

“Yes, Milady. I assure you, not a single fatality occurred en route to base.”

He said this while holding an elf in his arms—covered in blood.

Looking around, there were elves watching the guards warily, along with some Amaurus Academy security staff.

But none dared approach. Judging by the sword marks on the ground, Black Wolf had likely given them quite the scare.

“Black Wolf. I told you… it was fine to arrive late, as long as it was peaceful. What in the world is this mess?”

There was no way to see this as “peaceful.” He’d just coughed—and blood came out with his sneeze. This is exactly why I begged him not to…

“Everyone’s still alive. That’s fairly peaceful, wouldn’t you say? Even if Her Highness believes it’s fine to be late, our top priority is your safety. Being late simply wasn’t an option.”

Well, he’s got a way with words.

I get that he rushed when we went to the academy because being late was unacceptable. But this time was different. I wasn’t unguarded.

I knew that to him, my mother and father’s orders came before mine, but if this caused a diplomatic incident, the continent itself could be in serious trouble. That had to be avoided.

I didn’t like it, but that didn’t mean I wanted them all dead. I’d come to realize people here lived just like we did.

“…Release them. I won’t say it twice, Captain of the Guard.”

Now what… Should I bow to him or something? My head was already aching, but first I had to end this ridiculous hostage situation.

Thankfully, Black Wolf let go of the elf he was holding. The poor thing collapsed immediately, unable to stand, but was quickly taken away by other elves.

The hostage incident was over. Now how do we resolve this standoff?

The solution was obvious, but… I didn't want to say it. Not because I'd be "losing," but because it went against everything Father had taught me.

Still, our side was in the wrong, so I had to apologize.

"…I deeply apologize for the actions of my guards. I am sorry. You all have shown nothing but respect—I have no excuse."

Apologizing doesn't kill anyone. I bowed my head to the academy and the elves. The guards behind me stirred a little, but I shot them a look that said, This is because of you.

I told them they could take their time as long as they didn't cause trouble.

"…Ah, no, Your Highness. Please raise your head. It's not you who should be apologizing, it's them!"

"Your Highness! You need not bow to those people!"

The tense atmosphere that had been on the verge of boiling over dissolved the moment I bowed—everyone started shouting for me to lift my head.

Oh, whatever. You're the ones who'll be in trouble—not me.

"Now, now, Lady Hoyeon. Please raise your head. No matter how regretful you are, there are positions in which one simply must not bow."

In that chaos, Dogeon leapt forward to offer advice.

Looking back, maybe I'd acted too rashly. This was a world where social hierarchy actually existed.

Well, I suppose in a continent that put such weight on pride and rank, that made sense. I did as Dogeon suggested and raised my head again.

The commotion died down a bit, but all eyes were still on me. Dogeon, ever sharp, quickly surveyed the scene and stepped in to mediate.

“Everyone. Before we draw further conclusions, why don’t we hear why they felt the need to come here—even spilling blood?”

No one asked who are you to say that—they all saw me heed his advice.

He skillfully led the conversation, doing his best to find a compromise. Thankfully, neither side was unreasonable, and they managed to talk it out.

After a lengthy debate, it was concluded that the guards were more at fault. The chaos on the way would be overlooked, but their actions here would be held accountable.

As a result, the guards were ordered to act as both security and laborers.

Black Wolf looked a little dissatisfied as he departed, but hey—no one forced you to punch your way in here.

“…Well, it seems things are wrapped up somewhat cleanly. With folks like that standing guard, we won’t have anything to worry about, I suppose.”

“They’re rough around the edges, but their skill is guaranteed. I’ll vouch for them. You’ve done well. Want a reward?”

“No, I didn’t do it expecting anything. But if I had to accept something… Well then, how about we find something fun to do indoors?”

That didn’t sound like something Dogeon would usually say, so I was a little surprised. But I decided to go along with him.

We ended up playing things like “Guess what I drew with paper and pen,” or tracing letters on each other’s backs and guessing the word…

Both games were awkward and clumsy—but it was a fun time.

And the next day… Dogeon was gone.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 116

116. Great Forest (7)

I was sure I'd fallen asleep in his arms. But something felt off. I reached around, trying to feel for him, but nothing met my touch.

All I felt was the blanket, soft and trying its best to be comforting, and when I opened my eyes, no one was there.

Well… it wasn't like Dogeon never woke up before me. He must have woken up first and gone off somewhere. I couldn't help but think he should've waited just a little longer, and a bit of annoyance crept in.

Still, I trusted him, so I wasn't overly anxious. There was no way he'd gone off to meet another woman or something. He had the right to a private life, after all.

Of course, I wanted all his time to be spent with me… but that wasn't realistic, so I had no intention of being unreasonable about it.

I wasn't half-asleep enough to be dragged off somewhere randomly, so today I figured I'd properly sit down and try putting on some makeup. As for the method and technique… well, I'd figure it out.

I laid out a bunch of stuff in front of the mirror, but I had no idea what any of it was. This… what is this? It looked like powder.

Touching each item one by one and guessing where it was supposed to go on my face, I started to wonder what I was even doing. Did I really need to wear makeup?

Putting vanity aside, the girl reflected in the mirror was breathtakingly beautiful even without any of it. Did I really need to risk ruining such a masterpiece with clumsy layers of paint?

Not that I had a reason not to. No one was going to see me anyway, and it was my own face. So, using the functions I'd guessed at through trial and error, I clumsily tapped at my face in front of the vanity for a whole hour.

And then wiped it all off five minutes later.

It reminded me of something I tried to cook back in my hometown. That disaster and my face now… they kind of overlapped. I tried because I wanted to look good, but… I must really be hopeless when it comes to this sort of thing.

How depressing. It would've been nice if someone was here to comfort me at a time like this. Even after I thoroughly scrubbed my face clean, removing every trace of leftover residue, Dogeon still didn't return.

It was almost lunchtime. Where had he gone off to that he wasn't back yet? I began to wonder if I should go look for him—and that's when I noticed his coat tossed carelessly on the floor.

There had been times he went out without his coat, but it was rare. Even on the hottest days, he stubbornly kept it on.

My suspicion only grew stronger. Where the heck had he gone? There were no signs of a struggle or resistance, so it wasn't a kidnapping. He was still dressed, save for the coat.

No matter what had happened—I had to find him.

I didn't really think anything bad had occurred… but it wasn't like I could just sit still when he was missing for this long.

I stepped outside and stopped a random passing elf to ask if they'd seen Dogeon.

"Excuse me. May I ask you something? Have you seen a tall, exotic-looking, handsome man? He stepped in to mediate a dispute yesterday."

"Uh, well… I've seen lots of dark-haired and handsome men, but exotic-looking…? No, I don't think so. I heard there was a dispute yesterday, but I wasn't there myself, so I'm not sure. Sorry…!"

Maybe it was too random of a person to ask. But still, wasn't fleeing in such a hurry a bit much?

"…Haah. Where did you go?"

Seriously. Where could he have gone? I even tried sniffing around in case there was a lingering scent, but I couldn't smell him anywhere.

I asked around and even ran into some of the elves who'd been there yesterday, but I didn't gain anything useful.

My head, which had been filled with thoughts of eating lunch together as soon as I found Dogeon, was now quickly clouding over with ominous ideas.

What if something had happened to him? What if he'd betrayed me and run off with some other woman?

The "what ifs" started to pile on, one after another, spinning into increasingly anxious thoughts. I even forgot I was hungry, and my walking had turned into a near-sprint when I finally ran into some guards.

"…Whoa there! Princess, where are you rushing off to? We nearly collided! Is something urgent going on?"

"Have you seen Dogeon?!"

"Dogeon… Oh, you mean that timid fellow who was always stuck to your side? He never left your side, right? I haven't seen him."

Where… where did he go? Ignoring the puzzled guards wondering why I was in such a hurry, I went off to search the places Dogeon might've gone.

But he was nowhere to be found. Everyone I asked said the same thing—they didn't know.

Where is he? Where could he have gone without me?

"Oh dear, I felt a chilling presence and came to check—it's you, Princess. Uh… doesn't look like a good time for jokes. Did something happen to upset you?"

Who was that? Ah, it was the captain of the guards—Heukrang. If anyone knew anything, it would be him.

"…Heukrang. Have you seen Dogeon? He just vanished this morning. Do you know where he went…? You must know… right?"

Just as I was beginning to panic, I felt a bit of relief running into the second most reliable person I knew here. The first being Dogeon, of course. He looked at me, gave up on making a joke, and tapped his head as if trying to recall something.

"Hmm… I think I saw him heading somewhere early in the morning… but that's it. I was busy handling chores, so I didn't think much of it. But he's disappeared, you say?"

I'd thought, "as expected of him," when he said he saw Dogeon, but the rest of his answer left me disappointed. Still, at least Dogeon hadn't vanished without a trace.

"Yeah. I checked every place he might've gone, but I couldn't find him. Did you see which way he was headed?"

"I get how you feel, but calm down a little first. He was headed toward the World Tree area—but that place is blocked off. And you've… already searched there, I assume? I can tell just from your face."

I'd searched that area ages ago. So even Heukrang didn't know exactly where Dogeon went.

In that case, there was no choice.

"…Heukrang. Call all the guards together and tell them to find Dogeon first. I don't care where—they're to search everywhere. Professors' offices, storage rooms, everything."

"If someone tries to interfere… shall we take the diplomatic route, as you always say?"

"I don't care."

"…Understood. I'll use discretion."

Heukrang, seeming to fully understand what I meant, immediately dropped what he was doing and gathered the nearby guards.

There was no reason for me to stay here.

He said Dogeon was headed toward the World Tree, and while the way there was blocked, I'd already searched nearly everywhere else.

Maybe, somehow, he'd made it past the barrier surrounding the World Tree. Maybe not. It didn't matter.

If there was even a chance Dogeon was in there, then none of that mattered, did it?

Somehow, I felt like I could do it. No—I knew I could. I had no proof, but I had the conviction that if I willed it, it would happen. That lunatic professor had sealed the place off, supposedly for some dangerous experiment… meaning Dogeon could be in danger.

…In that case, I had to go.

***

“You’ve really improved. At this rate, you might not need me much longer.”

“No way… I’ve only gotten this far thanks to you, Eric. Your teaching might not be as structured as Hoyeon’s, but what you say sticks in my head like magic. I wonder why? Hehe.”

“That, I don’t know either. But if the results are good, that’s what matters, isn’t it?”

Even if she could drop out of the Academy, the successor position wasn’t something she could abandon just because she wanted to. So Anya was still buried in her studies.

The one saving grace was how quickly she absorbed everything her lover taught her. Neither of them understood why—but anyone watching them might have a clue.

“Hmm… I’m not too sure about this part. I’ll probably need to ask Miss Hoyeon for a separate lecture…”

“Ugh, I have to learn from Hoyeon again?”

“You don’t want to?”

“No, I mean… it’s not that I hate it… ugh, yeah. Honestly, I kind of do. She’s a great teacher, but how do I put this? She pushes me to my absolute limit… It’s exhausting. So—huh?”

Just as she was lamenting the ordeal of learning under Hoyeon, there was a knock at the door.

“There shouldn’t be anyone coming… I’ll get it. Who is it?”

As she opened the door, someone pushed it open forcefully, shoving her backward.

“Ugh… What the—! Who… are you…?”

Hearing the commotion at the entrance, Eric ran out to see what was going on.

Standing there was a heavily armed beastkin.

The intruder walked right past the fallen Anastasia as if she didn't matter, quickly searching the room before leaving the moment he confirmed it was empty.

"Anya! Are you alright?"

"…I'm okay. Just startled, that's all… But why were they even here…?"

Knowing the man was one of Hoyeon's direct guards and recalling the rumors of yesterday's disturbance, she had no idea why they'd suddenly searched her room.

They didn't even give her a chance to protest before leaving. And why would Hoyeon's guards, instead of protecting her, be acting so suspiciously?

She was about to dismiss it as a one-off incident when the sound of shouting and screams reached her ears.

"…Eric, something strange is going on, don't you think?"

"I'd love for this to just be a false alarm… but I doubt it. Are you going?"

Anya straightened her clothes and strapped on her sword.

"Yes. I hope it's nothing, but if not, it could be dangerous. And more than anything, I need to find Miss Hoyeon first."

She headed for the door, but Eric didn't let her go alone.

"I'd be fine on my own… but thank you for coming with me."

"I can't let the woman I love walk into danger alone. I may not be much help, but I'll do what I can. Shall we go?"

“…Let’s.”

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 117

117: Great Forest (8)

No matter how hard a human tries as a human, in the end, a human is just that—a human.

They can always choose to fall below that, sure. But they can never rise above it. Back when I first heard of Canaan's ideals, just before leaving the continent, I was briefly swayed.

What kind of vision must they have had, to believe they could cross the sea of stars as mere humans? What mysterious method had they come up with to turn away from the guidance of the stars?

Until I saw it with my own eyes, I had secretly held onto hope. But the moment I did see it, the illusion shattered. No matter how many times I looked around, there was no sign of hope or a future.

There were only humans, grateful to be alive today and praying tomorrow would be just like today. Maybe there was some grand plan, I'd thought. But after touring the entire continent, I realized—

There was no such thing. They were just scared of ceasing to be human, so they incited others and fled together. And once I knew that, the betrayal and emptiness hit me like a wave.

It was hard to accept—that someone who ran away for such a pathetic reason also had the ability to break through the veil and escape.

And so, after a short discussion with my comrades, we came to a conclusion. Fortunately, we were all in agreement, so there was no need to argue or persuade anyone.

We would destroy this continent.

The Star hadn't commanded us to simply scout. We were to judge with our own eyes, and if it fell short of the standard, we were to destroy it—without mercy.

Though we could no longer receive support from the homeland and the environment here was more than just unpleasant—it was outright hostile—we still tried to carry out the command the Star had given us.

We tried to sway the locals, change the environment, and somehow put an end to Canaan's mad flight.

But in the end, everyone died except for two. And even then, one of them ended up in pieces.

"…Now, Seonhak. You once said that though the human body is weak, the spirit is unyielding. Do you still believe that? Then I suggest you reconsider."

There had been only two of us in this space—now there were three.

One of them had been abducted, yes. I didn't know their true identity, but I could see clearly that the child was deeply loved. There was nothing more suitable.

It had been impossible to reach this place with a physical body, so I had no choice but to turn it into ether, imbue it with divinity, and satisfy the conditions to enter.

Losing the physical body was practically the same as death, but at least I could return the soul.

…Of course, I was sorry.

But I couldn’t abandon my mission. I had been created for this very purpose, and I had no other choice. All I could do was end Canaan’s aimless escape.

I had no way to contact the homeland. No power to end Canaan’s madness. That child likely didn’t have that power either. But perhaps they could become the spark of war.

No matter how highly praised she was as the top student, even she wouldn’t be able to stop this. I had analyzed the formula she designed to bind us and created a counter-formula to bind her instead.

It would only last about a week at most before she dismantled it, but that would be enough time. Enough for the child, enraged by the loss of their partner, to bring ruinous flames to this continent.

So become the spark, child of the stars.

***

When I arrived at the World Tree, it was completely surrounded by a curtain of blue light.

I threw a rock at it, kicked at it, even picked up a beetle stuck to the tree and threw that. Nothing worked.

The barrier stood there, resolute, rejecting anything and everything that tried to enter. The thought that he might be in danger kept gnawing at me.

You're in the way. You're in the way. A nuisance, a nuisance.

If not for that thing, I could get to where he was. That flimsy wall thinks it can stop me?

Impossible. Yeah, that's not possible.

Something like that shouldn’t even exist. So, it doesn’t.

Magic burst uncontrollably from my body, blanketing the barrier. Then it surged with violent energy and—

As if it had never existed at all, the barrier simply vanished. No wall, no trace that anything had ever been there.

I had no idea what just happened. No time to think, no reason to think. I had to find Dogeon—now. With that thought alone, I stepped into the World Tree.

Mana, divine power, magic, and demonic energy were all mixed together in such chaos I couldn't even tell what was what. Inside that mess, I could faintly see something.

Two bright presences… and one faint one. Magic I could understand, but… why was there a divine presence?

Ah. So that was it. No wonder it felt familiar—inside the World Tree was Lord Shikari. As for the other two, I had no idea.

"How did you…? How did you get past the barrier?!"

The elf professor beside me was shouting something, but I ignored him and scoured the area for Dogeon.

He wasn't here either.

Where? Where was he?

"…Professor. Have you seen Dogeon? He's been missing since this morning. I remember holding him close, so tight… and then he was gone. Do you know where he is?"

The professor had been rambling to himself, but thankfully, once I spoke, he fell silent and listened. A good man. Though his expression twisted awkwardly, he replied.

"…You don't even hear me, do you? I don't know. Only that some soul entered the World Tree. Satisfied? Now please, get out. I don't know how

you broke through the barrier, but this is no place for you."

"And that soul is the very one you're looking for, child."

As Lord Shikari suddenly emerged from the World Tree, a black sphere enveloped the elf professor. He tried to resist, releasing mana, but it was no use—he was swallowed whole.

He wasn't dead. Just trapped, like being sealed in a package. Not my concern. Shikari said the faint light inside the tree was Dogeon.

How? He didn't have the ability to enter that place. Then… he must have been abducted.

"…You've made it here, impressive. Unexpected, even… but yes. The soul of the one you cherish lies asleep within that tree. It was the doing of that wretched goddess, Canaan…"

…Blah, blah. So much talking.

The emphasis on "soul" told me… his body was gone. Poor Dogeon. What did he ever do to deserve this?

Don't worry. I'll make you a new one.

I didn't know the principle. I didn't even know how to do it. I wasn't even sure I could. But I would. I'd already done something similar back at the cafeteria, without even realizing it.

I recalled the gestures my mother made at the pavilion.

First, a gesture to form a strong skeleton. Second, another to attach powerful muscles to move it. He'd need strength, after all—so I'd make it with care.

Mana was pouring out of me in torrents, but that didn't matter.

Now for the skin. A tan isn't bad, but I like it pale. The face didn't even need thought—it was already clear in my mind.

Unfortunately, I didn't know much about internal organs. Sorry, Dogeon. I'll have to use a basic model for now. I'll replace it with something better later.

After pouring out nearly all my mana, I opened my eyes—and there in my arms was Dogeon's body, exactly as I had imagined it.

Warm, solid—but missing one crucial thing: his soul.

"…Come here, Dogeon. Why are you over there all alone? Don't be scared… Come on, that's it…"

Gathering the last of my mana, I extracted Dogeon from the World Tree. Shikari, who had been chattering beside me all this time, finally fell silent, letting me focus.

It was faint, almost imperceptible, but even Dogeon's soul carried a trace of divine presence. Was that Shikari's way of protecting it?

I anchored the soul to the body—and that was it. No more mana left.

"…To think, even as the child of that being, that you would inherit such power… No wonder the Star sealed it away."

Shikari now stared at me with none of his usual playfulness—just pure caution.

Oh, right. I had something to ask him.

"Lord Shikari. I hate liars. So please, tell me the truth. Was it really Canaan who kidnapped Dogeon?"

I already knew who could have done it. So I just wanted an answer. Even if it was absurd, I wanted something.

Of the two bright presences, one was bound by something dark, unable to move. The other was Dogeon. That left only one possibility.

“…You know already, don’t you? Haha… What a foolish thing I’ve done. What good is hiding it now? Yes, I did it. I’m sorry. A grown man doing something so vile…”

“I'm asking why you did it. Why?”

I didn’t care about his regrets. Just answer my question.

“…To start a war. To ignite a flame that would burn this entire continent to ash. I couldn’t do it with my power alone. But if I summoned your power, and the armies of the homeland… Even just a brief moment would be enough. You must’ve seen it yourself by now—this continent has no dreams, no future.”

So that was his reason.

Dogeon still hadn’t come. He was sleeping peacefully, softly. I’d forgotten to give him clothes, so I covered him with his own coat.

While I gently examined his body, brushing his hair and checking for anything I might’ve done wrong, Shikari kept running his mouth.

“…So, Lord Shikari, you believe this continent is beyond saving.”

Is it?

That… I had to think about.

“…You demonic bastard…! So you’ve finally shown your true colors!”

Just as I was about to think seriously, a massive spear of light flew from somewhere and pierced Shikari, sending him flying. It came from the elf professor, who had escaped the black sphere.

Shikari retaliated, and chaos broke out all around me.

Still not my concern.

I thought back on what he—or she, or it— had said.

That without a future, one might as well be dead. I didn't agree, but… I couldn't deny that this continent felt kind of hollow. Sure, there were wondrous things here, but that was it.

Magic and tricks couldn't fill your stomach. Couldn't give you the strength to move forward. They could be a brief distraction, but no more.

…Hmm. It was hard to say. I'd once been someone without a future myself. So I couldn't come to an easy conclusion.

As I sat there, explosions ringing around me, lost in thought—Dogeon's eyelids began to twitch.

The Gloomy and Timid Princess Heads to the Academy - Chapter 118

118: A Total Disaster

It felt like I had just woken up from a really, really awful dream. Not the kind of nightmare that left you with a splitting headache or made no sense at all—it was disturbingly coherent.

My head was foggy, like it was wrapped in a thick mist, but I could still faintly recall what happened.

I had woken up alone and wandered toward the World Tree. Then, suddenly, I was in a white, empty space, watching a bizarre-looking girl hurl some mixture of accusations and questions at a woman.

Then I was back outside the World Tree, where that strange girl and Georg—no, Elliot—were flinging spells at each other in a chaotic battle. The World Tree even ended up damaged in the process.

It was a dream that was oddly specific. Maybe all the stress lately was creeping into my sleep. Or maybe I just slept in a bad position.

Anyway, all my plans had been canceled, per the official notice. I had woken up early yesterday, so today I figured I'd really sleep in. I adjusted my pillow with that in mind.

…Except something felt off. This wasn't a pillow.

It felt soft and springy, like I was lying on someone's thigh. No way the pillow had swapped places in my sleep.

And now that I thought about it, I could feel the chill in the air, the strange texture of the blanket over me… and the surface underneath me wasn't a bed.

I forced my heavy eyes open. The light was blinding—it made me wince instantly.

"…You're awake, Dogeon? How's your new body?"

In that moment, I saw a silhouette—it was Hoyeon. I hadn't recognized her at first; the sounds and scents were all unfamiliar.

Wait. That meant I'd been sleeping on her thigh. I jolted upright, quickly easing the burden on her.

There was no way I wouldn't recognize her. But… what did she mean by "new body"? What was she talking about?

"…What are you saying, Hoyeon? A new body…?"

Still sluggish from sleep, I twisted and stretched to check my body. But instead of the usual cracks and protesting muscles, nothing hurt.

Actually, I felt… incredibly refreshed. Not even a hint of fatigue. What?

Things looked a bit clearer somehow, too. And there was this strange, hard-to-explain feeling—like my senses had expanded.

"…Ah. Ah… Aaah? Aah."

Even my voice sounded a little off from yesterday. Something had happened to my body. I wanted to think more about it, but I couldn't. Because of what happened next.

Elliot came crashing down in front of me.

…What the hell? Why was he in this state? Even at a glance, it was clear he was badly wounded. Yet he was still hurling dozens of spells, fighting back with terrifying force.

Against who? I followed the trajectory—and saw the bizarre-looking girl from my dream. Except, unlike the dream, she was now missing half her body.

…This wasn't a dream?

"Hoyeon… What the hell is going on?"

I had no clue what was happening, but I knew it was serious. That girl was radiating pure demonic energy.

And judging by the way Elliot was attacking her with murderous intent, this had to be a real demon—or something close.

But Hoyeon looked like a calm lake. Amid all the chaos, she just smiled faintly at me, utterly unshaken.

"A lot's happened, but nothing too important. More importantly, Dogeon, I've got a somewhat serious question. Is that okay?"

She could say that in a situation like this? But more than her nonchalance, I was more concerned about what she wanted to ask me. If she was asking now, it had to be big.

"…What is it?"

"Hm. Do things that never change… deserve to continue existing?"

What kind of question was that? My mind just couldn't process it at first. Things that never change? Deserve to continue?

What was she really asking? I tried to piece it together.

It didn't take long to realize what she meant. She was asking whether this continent—stagnant and unchanging—deserved to survive.

“…That’s not something you can judge by value alone. Even if there’s no progress, nothing deserves to be erased from the world. Besides, it could change someday, right?”

“But what if it’s too slow? What if the chances of it changing are absurdly low? What if it’s holding other things back? Would you still say it should stay?”

She clearly saw things a little differently. From what she’d told me before, her homeland was a place of constant progress and innovation. Compared to that, this continent must’ve looked outdated and sluggish.

That, and Jeongho’s ideology, probably influenced her too. Still, I couldn’t just sit back and let her wipe out an entire continent.

This was the best I could do. So I kept trying to reason with her.

“…If they’re being dragged down and still aren’t cutting ties, doesn’t that mean they’ve got the luxury to be patient? Wiping something out could go wrong, too. Does it really have to be like that…?”

Honestly, I wasn’t confident I could convince her. Even if half of what she said was exaggerated, the East was undeniably far ahead of this place.

But there had to be some reason to preserve it. If I just thought hard enough, I could find at least one good thing.

But then—she said something that brought all my thoughts to a halt.

“Dogeon. I just want you to be honest. You're doing this because you don’t want to see people die, right? Tell me.”

……

“…Yeah.”

I just… didn’t want to see people die. Even if this continent had no progress, I hated seeing the efforts of those trying to live day by day trampled over.

“Then that’s all you had to say.”

Even if she’d seen right through me, I hadn’t given up on convincing her. I still hadn’t given her a reason she’d accept.

“That’s enough. I’ve reached my own conclusion. Let’s go.”

“…Go where?”

Where could we go in the middle of this chaos? My heightened hearing picked up distant screams. That probably meant the academy was in trouble too.

“Where else? Where we’re supposed to be. Can you walk?”

I hadn’t heard her conclusion, and I still didn’t understand what she meant by “new body.” This weird sensation that my body wasn’t my own. And the background chaos—Elliot and the girl were still tearing into each other.

Nothing had been resolved, and it made me uneasy.

Still, I’d just woken up and felt perfectly fine, so walking wouldn’t be a problem… but my skin—why was it like this?

It wasn’t my usual tanned tone—it was pale. And my body felt unusually energetic. Wait… did she literally make me a new body?

Who? Why? How?

I wanted to ask what had happened—where my old body had gone, why I’d woken up in this one—but Hoyeon was already walking far ahead.

“…Wait! Where are you going?! Child, what conclusion have you reached?!”

The strange girl, now even more damaged, tried to block Hoyeon’s path. I rushed over, thinking it was dangerous—but Hoyeon beat me to it with a reply.

"…It's the punishment for a god who dared touch Dogeon. A se—cret."

"What—?!"

Just as I reached her side, a massive pillar of light brushed past us and obliterated the girl. The light shimmered for a few moments before settling down.

Hoyeon, completely unfazed, casually linked arms with me and offered a teasing comment.

"…How about tying your coat around your waist? I've seen everything already, but the others haven't."

***

Meanwhile…

Heukrang found himself feeling a flicker of competitiveness as he sparred with a young woman who kept coming at him relentlessly. If they brought her to the East, she'd definitely be made a warrior—he could admit that much.

But that was it. She was impressive for a human, sure—but only on par with his subordinates. He was barely trying.

On the other hand, Anastasia was fighting with all her might. She could feel the gulf in skill, but she knew this man was one of the key players behind the chaos. So she gave it her all.

In the distance, Eric was struggling against an elderly opponent—but Anastasia didn't have the luxury to check on him.

"Now, that's quite enough, Lady Anastasia. I don't have any business with you, and if you get hurt, the Princess would be terribly upset. We're just searching a few rooms—not attacking anyone. Don't you think you're overreacting?"

"…Hah… Hah… If that's the case, then why are there screams?!"

“Well, that’s because they weren’t exactly cooperative—huh? Princess?”

Heukrang’s eyes fell on Hoyeon. And next to her—

It was Dogeon. He looked different—taller, paler—but there was no mistaking it. If Hoyeon was holding onto him like that, it had to be him.

He abandoned the fight and dashed over.

“You found him? No—where did you find him? And… why is he white again…?”

“He was inside the World Tree, in soul form. So I made him a new body.”

“…Yes. That’s… what happened…”

Hearing Hoyeon speak about something so absurd with a straight face, and seeing Dogeon agree with a bitter smile, Heukrang gave up trying to understand what had happened.

“…Anyway, now that you’ve found him… we’ll stop the search. That's okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks for your help.”

With that, Heukrang darted off and shouted loudly:

“It’s over! Stop and regroup!”

Anastasia was left standing alone, utterly confused, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

“…Miss Hoyeon! And Dogeon—sir? What is going on?! The barrier around the World Tree is gone, there were explosions, your guards are acting aggressively—what’s all this?!”

And to that, Hoyeon simply replied:

“Nothing at all.”